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THE
Beautiful Mogul Princesses

By
MAHARANI SUNITY DEVEE

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THE ENCHANTED VIOLIN.

AKBAR THE GREAT had many wives, for he cemented every treaty with a feudal kingdom by marriage with one of its daughters. Thus his Royal zenana was full of beautiful women of different races and creeds. Among them was a lovely Rajput Princess.

This fair girl came from a kingly house, and her father, according to ancient custom, had sent with her, when she came to Agra as a bride, ladies-in-waiting, maids, cooks, altar-boys, musicians, and all that could add to the comfort and state of his little daughter in her new life.

The Princess had bidden farewell to her childhood's home with tears and a trembling heart. Her marriage with the Emperor was celebrated in his capital, and when she entered the Royal zenana, Akbar's numerous queens looked at her with interest. Some smiled at the baby face and childish charms of the new arrival, and felt that here was no cause for alarm.

The little Princess was shy and nervous among her sister-wives, some so beautiful and grand, others so strange, and all older than herself. She longed to see once again the Royal bridegroom whose handsome eyes had caught her heart when she met them first in the marriage ceremony. Soon he came into the zenana, and singled her out for his favour. Their mutual attraction for each other ripened into love, and before long the jealous ones among the Begums realised that the shy bride was the favourite wife. They sought for cause to poison their lord's mind against her.

Among the Rajput Princess' attendants was a violinist. Presumably a slave girl and extremely quiet and reserved, this girl charmed her mistress with her music and songs. The sweet deep timbre of her voice would speak to Akbar's Rajput bride of her native land so far away. The hours would pass unheeded by the Princess while the slave girl sang and played.

The jealous Queens noted, smiled, and whispered. The Royal husband grew suspicious. One day he said to the little Princess :

" My Rajput Begum, I like not that slave girl of yours."

" Why, *Jahapuna* (Your Majesty) ? " she asked surprised. " What has she done to offend you ? "



The hours would pass unheeded while the slave girl played
- and sang

"Nothing," replied Akbar, "except you seem to be too fond of her. When she sings and plays on her violin you forget me, and she is constantly with you. I do not like it."

"I love music, Your Majesty," explained the Princess, "and when you are not with me, my lord, the hours are long."

This reason satisfied the Emperor for a time, but the zenana whispers grew louder, and he again and again complained of his favourite's preference for her slave musician.

One day he suddenly entered the Princess' apartments and found her sitting absorbed in the music which poured from the slave girl's throat. Akbar stood for a few minutes watching his wife, whose chin rested in her tiny hand as she bent forward with eyes suffused with tears. Then his gaze rested on the slave girl. Her strong deep voice filled the room and her eyes were fixed on her mistress' face.

"What a deep voice for a girl!" thought Akbar.

Then he crossed the room and ordered the slave away. The musician started to her feet and hurriedly left the apartment. Akbar now spoke severely to his young wife.

" I do not like that girl and I don't wish you to have her in your room any more."

The Princess smiled sweetly and, taking the Emperor's hand in hers, said : " *Jahapuna* (Majesty), why so jealous ? Are your eyes so blind with love that they cannot see that you and you alone are the sun of my life ? I like the girl only for her music. You won't deprive me of this pleasure when you are away from me, will you, my husband ? "

But Akbar was obdurate. " I don't like the looks of that girl," he said. " Don't have her in your room again."

The Princess pleaded. " Do not be displeased, my lord. When you are not here I am so lonely. Forgive me and let me still have this music which is my only happiness, when you, *Jahapuna*, are away from me. Oh, husband, dear one, I love you."

Her sweet tones and the fascination of her face drove away the Emperor's anger, and he said no more about the musician.

But a few evenings later he entered her room abruptly, and found the slave girl again there. The Princess was half reclining upon a couch, and at its foot knelt the musician playing and singing as before. The Princess, as if was drinking every note the

violinist played, neither heard Akbar's approach.

He stood and watched them for several minutes. Then striding towards the couch he said in a loud harsh voice :

" Again ! Why do I find this musician in your room ? "

The Princess, on hearing her husband's voice, jumped up from the couch and came to him saying : " *Jahapuna* (Majesty), forgive me. I did not hear you enter."

" What does it matter whether you did or not ? " returned the Emperor contumuously, meeting her pleading look with a stern frown. " Why have you that woman singing here ? I told you I did not wish her to be in your room again, and you have disobeyed me."

" Majesty, husband, hear me, I entreat," began the Princess, frightened at her husband's anger and his forbidding aspect.

But Akbar was too enraged to heed her pleading. " I will not listen to any excuses," he said. " Your disobedience is sufficient. I am sure from the way that you and that musician were absorbed in each other that he is no woman but your lover in disguise, and that you are an untrue wife to me."

The Princess looked aghast. Catching Akbar's hand, she cried : " Oh my husband ! Oh Badshah lord ! what are you saying ? "

The angry Emperor flung her hands aside. " No more. I believe what I have said that this is your lover." And his wrath poured forth in a torrent of cruel words. The Princess stood with her hands clasped to her breast and her face deadly pale, listening in horror to her husband's awful accusations. As he concluded with the words, " I am sure this is no woman but a man and your lover," to her horror and amazement the violinist stepped forward and said : " His Majesty is right. I am a man."

The Princess fell at her husband's feet. " *Jahapuna* (Majesty), my husband, I did not know my violinist was a man."

Akbar laughed cruelly and drew himself away from her, saying : " I knew it."

" Hear my story. Let me explain to both of you," pleaded the musician.

" Explain to both !" Akbar echoed scornfully. " This is a prettily arranged scene. However, I may as well see the comedy to the end. Say on," he commanded the musician.

"Badshah salamat (I salute Your Majesty)," began the man respectfully. "When the Princess was a little girl I used to go to the Raj palace every afternoon and play with the Royal children of whom she was one. Unknown to her or to anyone I worshipped her as a *devi* (goddess) and have done so ever since. Later, when all of us grew older I was not allowed into the *Under Mahal* (Palace Zenana), but none the less did I revere her and carry her image in my heart. When the news spread that she was chosen to be Your Majesty's bride, and that the King her father sought a slave girl violinist to come in her suite, I determined to be that musician at whatever cost to myself. I succeeded in my plan. None helped me or knew of it. I confided in no one. I alone am to blame. The Princess is innocent. You occupy her whole heart. For me, it was sufficient to be near her and minister to her love of music. Believe me, Your Majesty, every word that I have spoken is true."

He paused, and Akbar exclaimed angrily : " You have both played your parts well, and now you are discovered, do you think I will believe this made-up story ? "

" Whether Your Majesty believes it or not my story is true. The Princess was ignorant of my disguise. She is innocent of

any wrong. And were it not that she, my heart's ideal, loves you, I would give you cause to regret your doubts of her, Emperor though you be. But since she loves you and you alone, I ask you, Sire, and her, to forgive me for the shadow I have brought into your lives."

Sadly he gazed at the kneeling Princess. Then turned and walked out of the room with his violin in his hand.

Akbar could not believe the extraordinary story he had heard. He turned to his weeping wife and said bitterly : " I thought that you loved me, that you were true to me, and all the time you have been deceiving me, and I loved you."

" My husband, believe me," wept the Princess, " what the violinist said is true. I did not know my musician was a man in disguise. I love you and only you." And again she tried to catch Akbar's hand.

The Emperor stepped away from her and said harshly : " Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I want no more of your hypocrisy. I believed in your youth and innocence and you have cruelly betrayed my trust."

" No, no," she wept, " I am your true wife. My love is all yours. When I was

brought here to be your wife, away from all I loved, my heart was sad. But when I saw you I was happy for I loved you, and when I learned you loved me I was happier still, and since then I have loved you and you only. Believe me, my husband, you are the centre and sun of my life."

"Then why did you disobey me? Why did you have the musician in your room when I had forbidden it?"

"I love music, *Jahapuna*. It filled the empty hours when you were away from me, and you must remember that when you forbade me to have that musician again in my room I pleaded with you and you answered not. I took your silence for consent. In that lies my fault, but not otherwise. I am your true wife and am innocent of all you say."

"No, no," said Akbar, "I do not and cannot believe you. I shall never visit you, never see you again."

"Oh! say not so," she cried. "You are all my life. I cannot live without you. Believe me, trust me, love me as before."

"No. No more of your enchantments for me. I can never forgive you," said Akbar, and without looking at her he turned and strode hurriedly from the room.

After he had gone the Princess rose from her knees. Her beautiful face was pale as death, and the large dark eyes betrayed the anguish of her soul.

The news of the discovery and the Emperor's anger had spread through the Royal zenana, and no sooner had Akbar left her apartments her maids and some of the ladies of the Imperial household came in. The Princess looked at them, and the tragedy in her face awed them to silence.

"Fetch me a pen and paper," she said to one of her maids, and the girl obeyed. Then as if speaking to those about her the Princess said, in a voice weighted with grief : "I prove my love to my lord."

Swiftly she bared her arm and with a stiletto which she drew from her girdle she gashed her own fair flesh and opened the artery in her arm. Dipping her pen in her life's blood which gushed forth she wrote : "My husband and lord, I die to prove my virtue."

None dared stay her hand. It was her act of devotion to the husband to whom she was true and loved. She wished to prove to him that every atom of her being, every drop of blood in her body was his and his alone. She was a Rajput, and to them

honour is high and dear. Thus she died ; and all who watched her understood. What is life to a woman, a wife, without honour ?

The words written in her life's blood, she handed the paper to her maid. " Deliver this into the *Badshah's* own hand," she said. Then she lay back on her couch.

The maid fled from the room with the missive, and her scared face as she entered the Emperor's presence told of something unusual. Akbar's still angry eyes scanned the message. He read it again. Then the terrible truth pierced his soul. He was half a Rajput himself and he now realised the Princess' integrity. Overwhelmed with grief and remorse he hurried to the Rajput Princess' apartments.

The group of ladies and maids at the door moved aside to let him pass. He knelt beside the couch and raised his young wife's pale and exhausted form in his arms, calling upon her to forgive him for his mistrust. At the touch of his arms and the sound of his voice her flickering eyelids opened and her eyes met his. The pallid lips moved a little. A shadow of a smile swept her face. Then a sigh and a tremor, and the pure faithful soul had fled. The awe-stricken ladies and maids

silently stole from the room and left the Emperor alone with his dead.

Akbar's handsome face bore the evidence of his deep grief for many a day. He erected a fine tomb over the mortal remains of the beautiful Rajput Princess whom he had so fondly loved and doubted so cruelly. Often at midnight he heard the soft music of a violin round the grave and the sweet singing of the favourite Rajput songs of his little Begum.

This music haunted the Emperor for many years.

Exquisitely lovely she rivalled the beauty of the famed
Nur Jahan.

MUMTAZA MAHAL.

IT was *Naorati* or New Year's Night, and the Imperial Gardens at Agra were brilliant with lights and music. Every stall glittered with diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems, for the Emperor Jahangir had expressed a wish that at this *Naoroz* (New Year's) *Mela* the ladies should sell precious stones and that the nobles and gallants of the court should buy them at whatever prices the fair vendors chose to ask.

In an empty stall stood Arjemund Banu, the daughter of Asaph Jah, the Grand Vizier. Her husband Jemal Khan, a Persian noble, many years older than herself, had failed to provide her with any gems. Too proud to complain or ask, and relying solely on her woman's wit, Arjemund had taken her place in her booth when the fair opened.

Exquisitely lovely, she rivalled the wonderful beauty of her aunt, the famed Empress Nur Jahan. Her glossy black hair hung in two heavy plaits over her shoulders. Her

large eyes were perfect in shape and of a soft deep black ; the delicately pencilled eyebrows and long silky lashes added to their beauty. Her velvety skin was fair as a lily. Excitement had tinted her cheeks with a charming pink flush. Her tiny hands were carelessly clasped together, the tapering fingers interlacing each other. A dainty foot peeped from beneath the silken trousers of her Persian costume, as she stood there waiting for the possible customer who was to help her revenge herself on her miserly husband.

Shah Jahan, second Prince of the Empire, sauntered through the fair. He had obeyed the injunction of his father and purchased a gem here and there, and now he wandered idly, seeking an opportunity to absent himself from the *mela*.

He passed the stall of Arjemund Banu and then retraced his steps. Her wonderful loveliness had attracted him, and an ardent desire to look into her eyes and hear her voice possessed him. He bowed before her and asked : " Fair lady, what stone have you to sell ? "

She raised her eyes to his and answered in a conquering voice : " A diamond of great price, *Mirza Saheb* (Sir Prince). "

" Let me see it," he pleaded, enraptured with her beauty.

With her sparkling eyes and her smiling lips displaying her pearly teeth, she opened a silver bag which hung at her girdle, and carefully drew from it a small packet of red velvet. Shah Jahan watched her perfect fingers unfold the velvet, and then her tiny hand held up—a piece of sugarcandy!

"A diamond of great price," she said again, her lovely face all dimpled with smiles and her dark eyes full of mischief. "A diamond of great price, *Mirza Saheb* (Sir Prince), worth a lakh of rupees!"

Shah Jahan's heart was no longer his. It lay at the feet of this dainty lady. "I will purchase this rare diamond," he declared, laughing at her wit.

"The money, kind Sir!" she demanded demurely. The Prince's suite had followed him and he ordered the sum to be paid.

"Now, fair lady," he asked when the purchase was concluded and the lump of sugar was his. "Tell me how it happened that you were reduced to this piece of sugarcandy."

With many a silvery laugh she explained all to him, and he enjoyed the thought of her miserly husband's discomfiture.

When the fair was over Shah Jahan sought the Emperor and the Grand Vizier. Shortly afterwards the formally arranged marriage between Arjemund Banu and the elderly Jemal Khan was annulled, and Asaph Jah gave his lovely daughter's hand to Prince Shah Jahan. Jahangir was delighted that his favourite son had found so fair a bride, and gave her the name of Khadija Begum.

In this wonderful world there are often lovely souls who bloom hidden within the shelter of their own homes like rare and beautiful flowers in some secluded garden. Only those who love and possess them know of their existence and their value. Such a hidden treasure was the Princess Khadija, and Shah Jahan, her young husband, realised her worth. She was the only woman the world held for him all his life. Wherever he went she accompanied him. Whether he abode in stately palace, or endured the privations of camp life, his wife was always by his side, sharing his joys and comforting him in his sorrows—the best friend and companion of his life.

In her childhood Arjemund often played about the Palace at Agra with her cousins Lyla, the daughter of Nur Jahan, and Seif Alla, that Sultana's adopted son. One day

when the Empress sat writing in her room the lovely little Arjemund ran in and asked her : " Aunt, where are my cousins ? "

The perfect beauty of the child's face so struck Nur Jahan that she remarked to a lady-in-waiting who sat near : " I wonder that my sister-in-law allows so lovely a child to run about a palace like this alone."

There was no similarity between the cousins although they had been playmates in childhood. Khadija's disposition was as sweet and loving as her face was beautiful. Lyla was ambitious and self-willed. She had never forgotten her father's murder, and her whole life was shadowed by the remembrance of it. She loved pomp and riches and was thirsting for position and place. Khadija shunned the publicity and grandeur of court life. Her happiness was in the quiet atmosphere of her home with her husband and children.

Shah Jahan lived for pleasure and joy and sometimes wondered and questioned his little wife about her retiring ways. One evening as he sat in a verandah he heard Khadija singing in her balcony above. Like many of the Princesses of the Moghul court she was singularly gifted and had been highly educated and trained in the arts of music and

painting. Her sweet voice always thrilled her husband, and he gently tiptoed to the edge of the steps to hear the words. The Persian melody came floating down to him, and he knew he was the object of the words.

"Why are you so beautiful, dear moon ?

I know, I know, you have borrowed his beauty.

"Why are you so fair, O stately lotus ?

I know, I know, you have stolen his whiteness.

"Why is your song so sweet, O trilling *Kokil* ?

I know, I know, you have copied his notes.

"Whence bring'st thou this perfume, gentle breeze ?

I know, I know, thou hast kiss'd his cheek.

"The world is bright and beautiful,

Because it holds him King of my heart,

"I love this world for holding him,

And I love him, King of my heart.

"All the little troubles, all the griefs of life,

And all the threatenings of the times

"Are naught to me when I look into his dear eyes."

The song ceased and a soft sigh caught his ear. Shah Jahan was in disgrace with his father, and he understood what she meant by "the threatenings of the times." When the little sigh floated down to him he sprang up the steps leading to the balcony and folded her in his arms and lovingly asked her : "To whom were you singing that entrancing love song, my shy little wife ? "

She nestled her pretty head against his arm and said in a gentle voice : " Why have you been so long away ? I have been waiting for you all this time."

He looked at the lovely face so near his own and asked in a mischievous tone : " To

whom were you singing ? You must confess.
I am getting jealous."

She took his hands in hers and, looking into his eyes, asked in a voice laden with love : " Do you really not know ? "

Shah Jahan smiled at her earnestness and repeated : " To whom ? Tell me."

" I was singing to you," she answered.
" Does this world hold any other to whom I would sing that song ? "

As he held her in his arms he whispered :
" Khadija, most wonderful of women, pride of my heart, there is not another like you."

And she whispered back in admiration :
" Nor like you."

Then Shah Jahan said : " I have just returned from my brother Shariar's house. How different you are to your cousin Lyla. Is it possible that she is really Nur Jahan's daughter ? "

" Of course, she is," Khadija answered gently. " Why do you ask such a strange question ? "

" Because she is so unlike her mother," Shah Jahan explained, " so wanting in tact and grace." Then he added : " And are you as

sure that your father, the Grand Vizier, and Nur Jahan are really brother and sister ? ”

“ Indeed they are,” she assured him.
“ But what makes you think it otherwise ? ”

“ Your father does not love his sister, the Empress, nor do I,” he said musingly.
“ Oh, my sweet little wife, whenever I meet your cousin Lyla and then come back to you I see the great contrast and it makes me wonder.”

“ But why ? ” she asked. “ What have I done ? What is it that you do not understand ? ”

He laughed mischievously at her serious expression and answered : “ Everything ! Here you are simple, quiet, and gentle, the sweetest little woman in the world. You do not understand, you cannot see the faults in anyone. If things are pointed out to you you open your big eyes with surprise and answer so gravely. I sometimes wonder if you are the same little lady who bought my heart with a lump of sugarcandy.”

“ What makes you talk like this, tonight ? ” she asked, looking at him. “ What troubles you ? ”

“ Do you want to know ? ” he said drawing her nearer to him. “ It is just this.

I have been visiting my brother Shariar and it puzzled me why Nur Jahan has married her daughter to him. Lyla seems to me another *Sikander Shah* (Alexander the Great), and it beats me why my quiet brother married her."

"I expect she loved him," Khadija answered, in her usual gentle way.

"It is not in Lyla to love any one," replied Shah Jahan. "I wonder what my poor brother will do with his ambitious wife. They don't suit each other at all. Do you know, Khadija, we are both ill-assorted couples. You should have married Shariar and I Lyla."

The Princess looked hurt and remarked : "You are very strange to-day. Why should I have married your brother and you his wife, pray ? "

Shah Jahan enjoyed her jealousy and, taking her in his arms, answered : "Because Lyla loves a gay life like I do, and I know it is an ambition of hers to grace a throne like her mother has done. And you, my little wife, love a quiet home-life like my brother Shariar does. I would have much enjoyed training Lyla. You are too good, too gentle for me, my Khadija. I am too ambitious and just everything opposite to your nature. Yes, you should have been

the wife of a quiet man like my brother, and not have had your heart torn with hardships and exile, my sweet one."

Then he remarked : " It is too late to change, isn't it, Khadija ? And I have learned that we always get what is best for us, and, after all, my sweet little wife is the only and the best woman in all the world for me. Now I have teased you enough and must give you some news. My father has ordered me to the Deccan. You must get ready at once, for we leave Agra immediately."

" O, why are you always being sent far away like this ? " she asked. " Must we go ? "

" Why ! " he answered bitterly, " only the Sultana Nur Jahan can tell why. But nothing can separate us, my Khadija."

They were soon on their long march to the Deccan. While there, their little sons Shuja and Dara fell seriously ill with fever. The Princess nursed her boys day and night with love and care. Shah Jahan bore his troubles well. His little wife's unselfish love gave him hope and strength. She had no thought for herself or her own weariness, and after a few months the young boys recovered. At last affairs in the Deccan were

satisfactorily settled and the Prince received orders to return to Delhi. Jahangir, much pleased at his favourite son's success, met him at Fort Rohtas. Here the Princess Khadija gave birth to her third son, whom the Emperor named Aurangzeb, "Ornament of the Throne."

When this boy was about four years of age, Shah Jahan offended his father and had to fly for safety to Bengal. Khadija refused to leave him and she and her children accompanied him, and she endured terrible privations as they journeyed hurriedly through the wild jungles of Telingana and Orissa. Wherever they went the Emperor's wrath followed his son, and at last Shah Jahan determined to seek shelter in the Deccan where he owned some forts. But he fell ill there and at last, overcome by misfortune, he yielded to the entreaties of Mumtaza and wrote to his father promising submission.

Jahangir demanded pledges of this promise and he chose Shah Jahan's four young sons as those pledges. Shah Jahan accepted the condition and prepared to send the boys to Lahore, but he was sad when he witnessed his beloved wife parting from her children. The little Princes reached the Imperial court in safety, and though their letters told of

the kindness they were receiving from the Sultana Nur Jahan, Khadija missed her sons and longed to have them back again.

Not long after this, Jahangir died and Shah Jahan ascended the Throne of Delhi. The Grand Vizier had taken charge of his grandsons on the death of the Emperor Jahangir, and had conveyed them safely to the Fort at Agra. It was *Naoroz* when Shah Jahan as Emperor re-entered Agra. The one only and happy thought in Sultana Khadija's heart was that she would see her dear boys again. When they arrived at the palace in the Fort there on the steps stood Shuja, Dara, Aurangzeb, and Morad waiting to welcome their parents.

Khadija drew her beloved children in her arms and shed tears of joy. Shah Jahan knew all her loving heart had suffered and felt he was to blame. Soon after he conferred upon her the title of Mumtaza Zamini, or "The Most Exalted of the Age."

The change in their fortunes made no difference in Mumtaza's disposition. She remained as sweet and unaffected as she had always been. The magnificence and grandeur of the court appealed to her but little. When the pomp and pageants he so loved were over, Shah Jahan always found a deeper, purer,

more exquisite joy with his gentle and retiring wife, the loving Princess who had shared his perils, sorrow, and troubles.

But though Mumtaza shunned the grandeur and ceremony of the court she widened her sphere as Empress, and she assisted her Emperor and husband in his trying and hard task of administering his Empire. The *Uzuk*, or Great Seal, bearing the Emperor's name, was in her charge, and all the *farmans* (Imperial letters) were carried to the zenana to her and she affixed the seal to them with her own hand.

Girls whose parents were too poor to marry them, wives and widows in distress, and every suffering woman in the Empire, sought the Royal zenana and found a friend and sympathiser in the Sultana. Associated in the Empress' good works was a Persian lady named Satiunnissa, who came to be known in the court as the Female *Nazir*. This lady was of a very learned family and had been appointed governess to Jahanara, the Princess Royal. Her charming manners, versatility, and talents endeared Satiunnissa to her Royal mistress.

Satiunnissa became the right hand and intermediary of the Emperor's charity to the women of his vast domains. When she

heard of any distressful case she enquired into it and reported it to the Sultana. Then when Shah Jahan came into the zenana at noon Mumtaza told him of it and the sufferer was relieved. Daily a crowd of women-suppliants awaited the Emperor's arrival in the zenana. Through Satiunnissa and the Sultana, lands were given to some, and pensions or donations were awarded to others. Maidens who were too poor to marry were aided with jewels, trousseaux, and dowries, and thus settled in life. Often the afternoon hours were wholly occupied in such benevolent work by Shah Jahan and his dear and clever consort.

It was only in the evening that the Emperor allowed himself any recreation and relaxation from the burden of Empire. Then the *Dewan-i-Khas* or Hall of Private Audience would be brilliantly illuminated with scented candles in jewelled candelabra, and the Emperor and his favoured courtiers would gather here to listen to music and song. Behind the screen, Mumtaza, the Lady Satiunnissa, and all the other ladies-in-waiting would enjoy the soiree. Sometimes Shah Jahan himself would sing. He had a fine voice and when he sang Mumtaza would lean forward to catch every note of his song.

Twenty years of married life linked them closer and closer together. Then came the

When he sang Mumtaza would lean forward to catch
every note.

terrible hour of parting. They were at Burhanpur on one of the Imperial Progresses when the dread summons came. Suddenly and swiftly the messenger of Death arrived. Mumtaza realised his presence and sent Jahanara to call her father. Shah Jahan hastened to the room where the Sultana lay in her last illness. Clasping his hands in hers his beloved wife looked into his face and said sadly :

“ *Jahapuna*, the divine call has come for me. I am about to leave this earthly sphere for the eternal home. King and lord, pardon me for every fault that I may have committed, every word that I have said amiss. Beloved husband, I shared your sorrows when you were a Prince, and now that the Almighty has given you power to rule the world I must leave you, and there is one request I would make to you, my Emperor.”

Shah Jahan bent his head upon her hands. His eyes were filled with tears. His whole soul was shaken with grief. Then, looking into the fading eyes of her, his only love, he said in choking accents : “ Beloved, ask what you will and on my life and soul I promise to perform it.”

“ Adored husband,” she said gently, “ marry not another woman when I am gone

for fear that if you do her children and mine should come to blows for the succession. Let Jahanara, our eldest girl, take my place in your household and be a mother to her brothers and sisters. Be a good father to our dear sons and be a son to my aged mother. Farewell," and with a smile on her face she closed her eyes, never to open them again.

Gently, calmly, she prepared for death and her soul floated forth into Eternity and the " King of the World " mourned his life's love. Tenderly, reverently, they laid her fair body to rest in a garden on the banks of the river Tapti, and the bereaved Emperor and his motherless children returned to Agra.

Overpowered with grief, Shah Jahan could not attend to any affairs of State, or give audiences, or show himself to his people. For a week the anguish of his sorrow overwhelmed him. Then the claims of Kingship roused him to duty, and he took up the threads of his now desolated life. He appeared once again as was his daily custom at the *Jharokha-i Darsan* (window in the eastern wall of the Agra Fort) to show himself to his subjects. The vast crowds were greater than ever, for since the blow to the Emperor and Empire the people had not seen their " father." The huge multitude stood patiently below the

walls of the Fort, waiting for the promised sight of their beloved Emperor. About three-quarters of an hour after sunrise the familiar Presence filled the open window, but what a change was there.

His beard had become silvery white, dark shadows lay under his eyes, and his figure was bent with sorrow. In reverent sympathy his people bowed before him, and he returned their salutation. Kingship was Duty and he must go on with it. But he mourned his wife all his life. Music and song no longer delighted him. Coloured garments, scents, and jewels were laid aside. He often said to his daughter Jahanara : "Empire has no sweetness, life no relish, since your mother is gone."

He could not rest with the body of his beloved so far from him, so he prepared a tomb on the bank of the Jumna near the Fort in Agra. From his window he could view the spot, and he sent his son Shuja, the Crown Prince, to bear the loved remains from Burhanpur, and in Agra they were laid to rest, and his love and grief found a solace in erecting over the tomb the most wonderful mausoleum the world has ever seen. Slowly stone by stone there arose the wondrous Taj. The hammers and chisels of twenty thousand workmen echoed through Agra for eleven

years, ringing across the river of Time and down the halls of History this story of a Royal Love.

All the great Empire of Hindustan contributed treasures to adorn the tomb of the "Pride of the World." From Candahar, Jeypore, and Jodhpur came long strings of camels laden with white marble. From Futtehpore was brought the red marble of the Mewat hills. The mines of Golconda yielded their rubies. The hills and rivers of Rajputana their stones. Ceylon sent her gleaming pearls and lapis lazuli. Kabul contributed onyx and jasper. Persia sent her sparkling gold-stone. Mount Sinai added her wonderful *Musai*. Egypt who mourns her ancient kings in pyramids bade the Nile yield her strange *Patunja* to adorn the tomb of the Empress of Ind. And the great Atlantic sent *Mungal* from her deeps. Italy lent her artists, and they worked side by side with Moslem and Hindu artisans, and at last the Taj stood completed. Wonderful memorial of Shah Jahan's love!

Marble walls mosaiced with all these precious stones in wreaths, scrolls, and frets, each exquisite in design and beautiful in colour. Lofty minarets and polished dome. Gates of silver and delicately trellised marble screens. And around the mausoleum a lovely

garden with water trickling in marble fountains and cypress trees waving a never-ending farewell.

But the disconsolate Emperor was denied the pleasure of walking in this peaceful garden in the shadowy evening time or of praying daily beside the tomb of her he had so loved. That which the dying Empress had wished to avert had come to pass, though Shah Jahan had fulfilled his promise and never married again; nevertheless, his sons had striven for the succession and the youngest, Aurangzeb, had seized the Throne. Shah Jahan was deposed by Aurangzeb and for seven weary years he lingered on—a prisoner in the Fort. He spent the long hours of each day sitting at the window which commanded a view of the Taj, gazing at it and weeping for the day when he should be reunited to his Mumtaza. His devoted daughter, Jahanara, never left his side and strove to console him. Aurangzeb knew his father was still very popular with the people and was afraid he might succeed him again, so ordered his trustworthy servants to put Shah Jahan's eyes out. No sooner were the cruel words uttered the deed was done. One evening he said mournfully to Jahanara : "I have grieved for nothing which I have lost, neither kingship, empire, freedom, or

state ; but would that mine eyes were spared me, I would have been quite happy, gazing at the place where my beloved rests."

Shah Jahan died, and was buried beside Mumtaza under the Taj, and there in the dust they lie, " King of the World " and the " Most Exalted," and above them stand the marble walls of the exquisite Taj, dream of beauty, wonderful in the glorious sun, rosy and soft in its setting rays, beautiful and mysterious in the moonlight. Oh, wonderful Taj ! And oh, still more wonderful Love ! The heart thrills while looking on such pure and delicate perfection, but the soul soars beyond the tapering minarets and lofty dome and strives to pierce the veil that hides from us the path of mortal love to immortality.



Raja Bhagwan Das had spoken and his daughter bowed
her head.

PRINCESS REBA.

RAJA BHAGWAN DAS had spoken and his daughter bowed her head.

The great Akbar had claimed a Princess of the Royal house of Jaipur, the pure and beautiful Reba, as bride for his eldest son and heir, Prince Salem.

Reba's mother had pleaded that her daughter's hand should not be given to one alien in faith.

" How refuse the *Badshah* (Emperor) ?" her husband had answered. " Did not my father Bahar Mal do homage to Akbar, and to cement the bond give him my sister in marriage, and she is the *Shahzada's* (Crown Prince's) mother. Am I not the *Badshah's* (Emperor's) friend as well as subject ? Can I say him nay when he asks me for a further token and seal of our friendship, my girl as wife for his eldest son ? Think you, it is not a small thing that Akbar chooses our daughter to be the future Empress of Hindustan. And I require not of her more than other Princesses

of her line and race have done. Several of the Emperor's wives are Rajput ladies besides *Begum* (Queen) Mariam, the *Shahzada*'s mother. Has not Reba herself become dear to Akbar when in her many visits to her aunt she has spent long months in the Imperial household at Futtehpore Sikri ? Yet, if all these things considered, Reba's heart go not to Salem, let her love for her country show itself. Marriages like these will create a bond of sympathy between Moslem and Hindu. The Emperor is wise, and we Rajput Chiefs see the necessity of his policy of intermarriage. To be the first wife of the Emperor's heir is a great thing for our Reba. Her son will one day be *Badshah*. Methinks he will remember the Rajput blood in his veins when he sits upon the throne, and be kind to his Hindu subjects. Let our daughter consider this and make the sacrifice the marriage involves for her country and people as a Rajput should. Happiness and peace of mind will follow."

Thus Raja Bhagwan Das had declared himself, and his wife and daughter heard his word. The messengers returned to Akbar with the Chief's acceptance, and preparations were set on foot for the marriage. Soon Reba found herself in Agra, the Moghul capital, and there her wedding was celebrated

with great joy and festivals. As the bride was ushered into the Royal zenana she was obliged to recite the Islamic formula : " There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah." This concession had been required of Akbar's Rajput brides, and Salem's had to follow the established custom.

But once within, Reba had been promised she would be free to follow her own form of worship. In her gentle heart religion held a firm sway. God was God, Moslems adored Him in one way, Hindus in another. But there was only the One, All-Merciful God, and He would hear and bless her. She was giving herself and her whole life for her country, but her heart she was keeping for God and His worship. If any wrong lay in the pronouncement of the Mohammedan creed, would not He, the God of all, understand and forgive ? Within, would not her every thought be His ? So, with heart attuned to sacrifice and devotion, Reba began her new life.

Prince Salem's first glance at his little bride showed him a vision of pure beauty.

" And she is mine," he said proudly to himself. " My father has done well for me. He is wise and kind."

Later, alone with Reba, Salem sought to win her heart. She had captured his, and he longed to hear from those sweet lips that he, too, had made a conquest. Docile and obedient, she was a model bride, but Salem wanted more.

"Reba, sweet Rajput Princess, tell me you love me with your whole heart," he pleaded. "Are you not my bride, my wife? Tell me you love me."

"The love that I have to give is yours. I love you as much as I can," she answered with the simple affection of a child. This pure Rajput maiden did not possess the worldly love that Salem wanted, and her childlike love did not satisfy him. Again and again he pleaded with her for her entire surrender.

In time Princess Reba bore a son, and him they named Khushru. Often when Salem watched her with her babe in her arms he encircled her with his, and whispered :

"Reba, tell me you love me with your whole heart."

She would laugh back : "Ever the same story, my lord *Shahzada*, why are you not satisfied?"

" You love your baby more than you love me," the Prince would answer, sometimes jealously.

And Reba would answer, in her usual gentle and quiet way : " Is he not yours too, our son ? Can I love him without loving you ? " And, sometimes drawing the babe closer to her, she would kiss the little face : " I hope that some day this boy will give you happiness, my husband, be a joy and pride to both of us."

Salem was never content. Ever and again he sought to win her whole heart, and awaken in her the warmth of love he craved. The heart of Salem knew many corners and, even after its citadel had fallen to the bewitching charms of the lovely Mihrunnissa, one corner always remained faithful to Reba and sighed for her subjugation.

The years passed on, and Akbar the great and good Emperor was gathered to his fathers. Salem reigned as Jahangir " Emperor of the World." And Emperor of the wonderful world of Hindustan he was, but one heart refused him full surrender, and that was the heart of Reba, his Rajput Queen and eldest Begum, the mother of his heir Khushru.

One lovely spring morning when the Royal Gardens were looking their best

Jahangir walked in them. The many trees were covered with clusters of gorgeous blossoms, and bright tinted flowers were everywhere. Birds twittered from branch to branch. Butterflies flitted here and there, and the air was sweet with the scent of the *neem* and *mende* blossoms. The trickle of water in the marble fountains mingled with the tinkle of the temple bells, and the spire of the temple where the Rajput ladies of the palace worshipped could be seen in the near distance. The Emperor bent his steps towards it, and in the garden there he met his Queen Reba gathering flowers for her *puja* (worship) as was her morning custom.

He had not seen her for days, and once again the wonderful purity of her beauty thrilled his heart. Dressed in a spotless white silk *saree*, she seemed to him a *Peri* of Paradise who, tempted by the loveliness of the garden, had stolen from Heaven to cull the choicest flower for her God. The scene delighted him and he stood and silently watched her as she passed from bush to bush in quest of flowers.

Her luxuriant black hair was unbound, and the silken tresses fell far below her knees. The centre had been carefully parted and smoothed like satin over her brow, but little tendrils had escaped and curled lovingly on



Jahangir met his Queen gathering flowers for her morning puja.

her forehead and round her dainty ears. The vermillion marriage *tika* marked her forehead and contrasted with its fairness. Two pearl bracelets adorned her shapely wrists, and a rope of pearls hung round her neck. Her long-lashed eyelids veiled her lustrous eyes. On her arm she carried a silver *shaji* (flower-basket), and as she plucked each fragrant blossom she dropped it into the basket. She was a perfect picture of pure and womanly beauty.

Jahangir watched her awhile and then drew gently near to her. That corner of his heart where she reigned swelled and almost choked him. She was his and must be more closely so. Once again he would ask her for that full assurance of her love. But he hesitated. She was such a perfect dream of beauty and peace he feared to break the spell, and as he hesitated and longed and watched her, she raised her glorious eyes to his and smiled.

Encouraged thus, he drew still closer but still he hesitated to speak, and she broke the silence which rested between them.

“ *Jahapuna* (Majesty), at what are you looking? Of what are you thinking?”

Jahangir stepped closer to her. “ Reba, my Reba, must you ask?” His deep voice

vibrated with admiration. "Don't you know?"

Reba smiled at him and shook her head gently. Then asked again : "What is it, some care of State ? Tell me."

The Emperor drew nearer. He would not touch her. She was ready for her *puja* (prayer), and he respected her for her piety. But he stepped as close as he could, and looking deeply into her pure eyes, he said sadly with a note of entreaty in his tones : "Reba, my Rajput fairy, say just once, 'My husband, I love you with my whole heart.'"

Reba drew a little away from him and laughed tenderly. "O my husband and *Badshah*!" she said, and her voice grew serious and sad. "It is the same old story."

"Yes, Reba," he answered impatiently, "the same old story to you perhaps, but to me it will be a new one, a welcome new one, if you will but say you really love me. I have asked, pleaded, for your heart for years. Just say these few words to please me."

Reba's sweet face paled. She answered gently : "My husband and lord, I have given you all I had to give. Have I displeased Your Majesty ? But what is my poor love

when you have your palace full of beautiful ladies all ready to give you theirs."

"Ah! what of them!" rejoined the Emperor. "I know I command their love, but I want yours and yours only." His deep voice surged with emotion and once again he drew closer to her.

"My Reba, saintly one, I want your whole heart. Do you remember how I craved it on our wedding night? You were a girl then, but your beauty and purity captured my boyish heart. The love you then inspired has grown with my manhood. You are more beautiful now than ever. You, my eldest Begum, are like a choice flower. You sit enthroned above all the ladies of my court and shine above them all with the pure radiance of a lily. You are kind to all. Reba Begum's sweetness is the theme of many lips. Have not those lovely eyes one glance of tenderness for me? Must I, your husband, your Emperor, ever plead in vain? Reba, say just once the words I ask you, I shall not ask again."

But the Queen stood silent and he continued: "You are my eldest consort, my Empress, the mother of Khushru my heir. As the future *Badshah*'s mother you are still more powerful. Oh, those tiny hands, what

power they hold ! Can you then, possessor of so much—Emperor, Empire, and Heir—be so miserly as to withhold from me the small gift I crave—a few words, assuring me of the entire surrender of your heart to my love ? Speak, I have said I shall not ask again.”

“ *Jahapuna* (Majesty),” and Reba’s voice was earnest and low. “ Husband, lord, forgive me ! Fain would I make you happy. All I had to give is yours, and yet I satisfy you not. What is the love you seek ? ” Her clear eyes were raised to his, and he gazed into their pure depths with a hunger which swelled to sadness in his. Reba’s eyes filled with tears, tears of sorrow for the pain she knew she gave. “ Sire,” she said and drew a step towards him, and her gentle and loving voice thrilled him. “ Majesty, our married life has been a happy one, and we should both be proud to think it has been so. Though others arranged our marriage for us we have nothing to regret and everything to be thankful for. Many there are who marry solely for themselves and their own happiness. But an intermarriage like ours is for a higher motive. By it, races are united. This is what Your Majesty’s father and mine thought of when arranging our union. Some day through our example there

may be so many happy marriages between Hindus and Moslems, so many happy homes, and India our country and our people will be still greater. Is not this a thought to make you happy ? It does me. You have benefited your Empire and your subjects, and this is better than the love you seek."

Jahangir heard her in silence. He gazed at her with admiration. The Emperor adored and worshipped his Queen Reba. When her voice ceased he bowed to her with deep respect and left her among her flowers. Never again did he seek from her an ordinary love. But often did he have recourse to her for counsel and sympathy.

Once as they talked together she asked : " What cloud darkens Your Majesty's brow ? Are you not Jahangir the great Emperor ? Your Royal zenana is full of the loveliest of the lovely, all offering you their love and homage. There is the latest and most beautiful of them all, the peerless Mihrunnissa, whom we have named Nur Mahal (Light of the Palace). Cannot her beauty smooth away thy cares ?"

Jahangir whispered : " She is the trouble, Reba. She has turned a deaf ear to my addresses and wishes to return to Burdwan. Do you think I could command her to see

me? Can you help me here, my faithful Rajput Queen?"

Reba answered: "She was another's wife, and now she doubtless mourns her loss. It would not be right to demand an interview. But," and Reba spoke sweetly and unselfishly, "I will see if I cannot persuade Mihrunnissa to change her mind."

"If she is still unwilling I shall not force her," said Jahangir, "I shall give her leave to return to Burdwan."

Reba answered proudly: "Well said, my lord. But fear not, I shall do my best to help you."

Jahangir reverently kissed her hand, saying: "Reba, you are a *devi* (goddess), and far above me."

And he left her, wondering in his soul at her unselfish devotion.

Reba sought Mihrunnissa in her apartments in the Fort. When the Sultana entered the fair Persian rose and paid her homage. Reba put aside her state and raised the lovely widow to her feet. Then seated herself beside her and spoke.

"Mihrunnissa, you whom all call Nur Mahal, I come to ask if you are still anxious to go back to Burdwan."

"Yes, I am," said the Persian.

"Well," said Jahangir's Queen, "then I must speak plainly to you. Just think of what your position and power will be if you accept the Emperor. Won't you consider it a while?"

Nur Mahal could scarcely believe her ears. She exclaimed incredulously: "Do you, Jahangir's eldest Begum, really wish me to consider this?"

"Yes," said Reba simply. "He wants you. He loves you. You know not what you are refusing. So I am making it clear to you. I offer you my husband, my position, my place, my jewels, and all that I have. Think on it and see if you cannot change your mind and marry the *Badshah*."

The Persian gazed in astonishment at the beautiful and earnest Rajput. She thought within herself: "Is this an ordinary woman? Can her words be true or do I dream?" She could frame no reply. The magnitude, the self-effacement of Reba's offer held her dumb.

"I have offered you all I have. Think on it," repeated Begum Reba, and then she silently left the room.

Nur Mahal sat for long, wrapped in wonder and admiration of the beauty,

graciousness, and unselfishness of Jahangir's Rajput consort. But Nur Mahal's was no ordinary mind, and she soon realised all that Reba's words conveyed. Ambition seized her for its own, and she finally accepted Jahangir's offer and became his Empress Nur Jahan (Light of the World).

After Jahangir's marriage to Nur Jahan, Reba devoted herself more than ever to a life of prayer, but a great trouble was overshadowing her, and often her sweet face paled as she lingered among her flowers.

Khushru, her son and the heir to the Throne, had never agreed with his father. During the old Emperor's lifetime there had been dissensions. Akbar had dearly loved the boy, and Khushru was a general favourite, for he was bright, loving, and cheerful, and a contrast to his harsh and imperious father Jahangir.

Now the breach was widened by Khushru's refusal to take as second wife the daughter of the Empress Nur Mahal by her first husband Shere Afghan. The Prince was already married to Aziz, the only daughter of Khan-i-Azim, the General of the Imperial Army. The *Shahzada* (Crown Prince) loved his wife and he was no admirer of polygamy. But the Empress Nur Jahan was ambitious.



Reba passed along the verandahs to Nur Jahan's
apartments.

She had tasted power, and foresaw in the union of her daughter and only child with the Emperor's eldest son and heir a prolongation of that power. She was angered at Khushru's refusal of her proposition and influenced his father the Emperor against him.

Aided by his father-in-law, the General of the Imperial Forces, Khushru rebelled. He was defeated, captured, and imprisoned.

The news of his degradation and sufferings was brought to his mother Reba. It affected her deeply, for her boy was the idol of her life, but she sought strength and consolation in her religion. Then came the more terrible news of the murder of Khushru. Dark whispers floated in the zenana of Nur Jahan's conspiracy, and how the Princes Kurram (afterwards the Emperor Shah Jahan) and Parviz were participants in the crime.

Reba heard these vague rumours and felt she must know the truth. She determined to see the Empress Nur Jahan and no sooner did the determination take shape in her mind than she passed along the verandahs to the suite of apartments allotted to Nur Jahan.

It was a dark night and for a moment Reba paused to look out on the heavy sky.

In the early evening a few stars had appeared, but they were now hidden behind thick clouds. No moon was visible and now and then a flash of lightning revealed the threatening night. Reba felt that the gloom around was in keeping with the sorrow in her own heart and that Nature mourned with her.

When she entered Nur Jahan's rooms, which were the most beautiful and luxurious in the palace, the Empress was surrounded by a circle of friends, relatives, and maids, who vied with each other in praise and flattery. Nur Jahan was seated on a couch with her daughter by her side. When Reba entered all rose and paid their homage to her, the Emperor's eldest Begum. But Reba noticed none of them. She walked straight forward to Nur Jahan, who felt a pang of pity touch her heart as she noticed Reba's beautiful face, so griefworn. The Empress rose and they faced each other, each of them Jahangir's Queen and each so lovely, but so different. Nur Jahan in the height of glory and Reba in the depths of sorrow.

Reba spoke : " Tell me, Nur Jahan, is it true ? "

" Is what true ? " asked Nur Jahan.

" That through your plottings my son, my precious Khushru, is slain."

The Empress did not answer. She gazed beyond Reba's sad face and all in the room held their breath in fear.

"Tell me, Nur Jahan, tell me, only tell me," Reba's mournful voice pleaded again.

Nur Jahan's head bent low. No word of denial fell from her lips, Reba knew the charge was true. Then the pent grief in her heart broke forth in tender reproaches.

"Oh, Mihrunnissa, Nur Jahan, I gave you everything, my husband, my position, my power, my wealth. You took all. The topmost height of the Empire is yours. You rule Emperor and Empire, as no woman ever ruled before. I kept only my son. And you have killed him too. Oh, why were you not satisfied? How could you do this? Khushru my son is dead, slain. The light of my eyes, the joy of my life had been snatched from me. Oh, Nur Jahan, Oh, Mihrunnissa! if you had had a son you would understand the depths of sorrow in my heart to-day. What is left to me now? My life is darkened."

With these sad words she left the Empress. As she stepped through the doorway of Nur Jahan's room, a vivid flash of lightning shot across the sky and a terrible crash of thunder reverberated through the

palace. Nur Jahan shivered and all around her were frightened. Some whispered : "The gods are angry that Reba, the good and saintly one, has been hurt."

Reba went slowly and sadly back to her own room and stood on the balcony there watching the gloom of the overhanging sky.

"The moon, the stars have disappeared," she murmured, "why should I linger here ? My life is now desolate and dark. Its gloom, its sorrow may sadden others. It may frighten them and make them doubt God's mercy. Better that I should die. Oh God, merciful God, call me."

Her daughter and maids watched her in tears. No word of theirs could comfort or console her. The sad days dragged heavily by in Reba's rooms and one morning they found her cold and dead. She had followed her son.

Khushru's remains had been buried in Allahabad, and there Reba's body was also laid to rest. Jahangir caused a lovely garden to be laid out round their tombs.

The Khushru Bagh or Gardens of Khushru exist to this day and there Reba sleeps the great sleep. It is sad to think

that her life with its unselfish love is so little known, but surely the perfume of such a self-sacrificing life lingers, and in the Kingdom above where virtuous souls go, beautiful Reba lives again.

ZEBUNNissa.

IT was the 7th of May, 1637, and all was mirth and rejoicing in the city of Agra, for it was the eve of the marriage of Aurangzeb, the third son of Shah Jahan, "King of the World," with Dilras Banu, the lovely daughter of Shah Nowaz Khan, a grandee of the Moghul court and a scion of the Royal house of Persia.

The *hennabandi* or ceremony of dyeing the bridegroom's feet with the red juice of the *mende* plant was to take place that evening, and the Khan Saheb was sending the henna in a stately procession, worthy of the two Royal houses about to be united. Soon strains of music filled the air, and from every house men and boys rushed to see the procession pass to the Imperial palace. Balconies and windows along the line of route were crowded, for the fair ones also wished to see the sight.

A blaze of torch-lights brightened the streets and a band of musicians led the cortege. Gold and silver trays laden with

costly presents were carried by richly dressed servants and slaves. First came the tray with the henna. Then a magnificent suit for the bridegroom, and next a box full of requisites for his toilet : dainty silver boxes containing rare eastern cosmetics and unguents, golden phials of *attar* and other perfumes, and prettily designed flower vases and trinkets. These were followed by tray after tray of sweets, sugarcandy, dried fruits, *pān* in gold and silver foil, and fireworks. Then came trays loaded with presents for all the Royal family : richly embroidered silken scarfs, velvet jackets, jewelled slippers, and caps. The procession consisted of a number of friends of the bride's family, both ladies and gentlemen, the former in closed carriages and palanquins and the latter on horseback or in open carriages. Mace-bearers and retainers walked on either side of the procession, and from every side as it passed arose cheers of welcome, congratulation, and approval.

The procession reached the Imperial palace and was received in the *Dewan-i-Khas* or Hall of Private Audience. The ladies of the Emperor's household were all assembled behind a screen, near which Prince Aurangzeb was seated. Soon beautiful fair hands were seen coming forth from under

the screen and colouring the Royal bridegroom's feet and hands with the henna. Next he was robed in the costly garments and sprinkled with perfume. Then the tiny hand of his sister Jahanara, Princess Royal, who had taken her mother's place since her death, placed a piece of sugarcandy on his lips to signify that she wished his life to be all sweetness from now onwards. Other ladies followed her example, and when this ceremony of wishing the bridegroom good luck was ended, there followed a banquet.

The next night, a few hours before the dawn, the wedding was celebrated, and after several weeks of happiness in Agra the Prince, accompanied by his bride, returned to his duties as Viceroy of the Deccan.

A year later in the Fort of Daulatabad Princess Dilras Banu lay in travail, and Aurangzeb paced the ramparts praying fervently for the safety of her whom he loved so well. As the mosque bells were ringing for evening prayers, and he stood watching the setting sun tinting with rose colour the walled city at the foot of the ancient fortress, the news was brought to him that the Princess had given birth to a daughter.

When, later, he held the frail pledge of their union in his arms and looked into the

rosebud face of his little daughter, he whispered to his wife : " Beloved, is she not beautiful ? We must call her Zebunnissa, for truly her tiny face holds promise to be one of the loveliest among women."

So the baby Princess was named Zebunnissa, and how her father loved her, and he often played with her on the wide verandah of the *Barahdari* or pavilion within the Fort.

Other children were born to the happy parents, but the little Zebunnissa always remained her father's favourite. Her intellect like his was keen and powerful, and from early childhood she showed a preference for literary pursuits. Aurangzeb superintended her education himself, and engaged a highly gifted and trained governess for her. Hafiza Mariam Bibi took a great interest in her pupil's progress and when the little Princess mastered the *Koran* and recited it from memory to her father, the governess' pride and pleasure were equal to the Prince's. He was so proud of his daughter's cleverness that he gave her 30,000 gold mohurs as a reward for her diligence.

As she grew to maidenhood Aurangzeb's affection and pride in his eldest daughter increased. Very fair, with a quantity of silken black hair and exquisite features, Zebunnissa

was indeed one of the loveliest of women. Her mother delighted to dress her in the Persian style and adorn her with jewels. Zebunnissa cared little for either jewels or dress. Her whole mind was centred on books and study. But she was the daughter of an Imperial house, and she submitted to be appareled as became her rank to please her father and mother. So her lovely arms and wrists were encircled with strings of lustrous pearls, and the same precious gems adorned her swan-like neck. Pear-shaped pearls set in gold hung from her dainty ears, and often her thick plaits of hair were entwined with pearls.

As she grew older the little Princess ruled her father. Seldom was a request of hers refused, but often the court trembled at her temerity when Aurangzeb was in one of his Royal rages. The Prince was ambitious, crafty, and cruel, and as Zebunnissa grew older she realised this and tried, whenever possible, to soften her father's character and influence him against his weaker self.

When Zebunnissa was about twenty, Aurangzeb usurped the Throne and imprisoned his father the old Emperor Shah Jahan. At first he intended to murder him, but Zebunnissa, who had accompanied him to

Agra, heard of the plot, and fearlessly came to Aurangzeb and pleaded for her grandfather's life.

Princess Dilras Banu had died the year before at Aurangabad, he could not resist her pleading and gave her his word that the aged Emperor should live.

Her maternal grandfather also was indebted to her for his life. Aurangzeb had imprisoned him and Zebunnissa's words had had no effect on her father, so she rigorously abstained from food for three days. When Aurangzeb commanded her to eat she informed him she would continue fasting till her grandfather was released. As no persuasions could overcome her determination Aurangzeb ordered his father-in-law to be set free and even appointed him Governor of a Province, but he did so with a bad grace, saying in angry displeasure : " I have issued this order for his release under compulsion, but shall reconsider it carefully afterwards."

The Prince assigned a suite of beautiful rooms in the Imperial palace to Zebunnissa. She chose one of the spacious rooms for her library. The great windows opened on to a marble verandah. The walls were lined with shelves, and the hundreds of volumes which filled them were devoted to history, languages,

law, and the Moslem religion. In this library the Princess spent several hours every day, and while she studied there none dared disturb her.

She knew she might never marry, as no one would be considered worthy to suit the eldest daughter of the Great Moghul, so she determined to be famous for her learning. She was especially fond of studying the laws of administration and she was often consulted on judicial and criminal cases by officers of the Imperial court, and so well did she know the different codes that it was not necessary for her to refer to any books. She would listen to the difficulty, consider while listening, and advise almost immediately, and her judgment was keen and nearly always correct.

The ladies who waited upon her in her library were especially chosen to help her in her studies. They were of mature years, learned and serious. Other and younger attendants assisted her in the management of her father's household, for Aurangzeb relied upon her absolutely and whenever he travelled she accompanied him.

The servants of the Royal household were devoted to her, for when any were ill, she nursed and tended them like a mother, and

was always ready to help them. The poor and suffering came to her for relief, and as she was not a strict purdah lady, it was easy for them to obtain access to her.

Though she was so loved she never forgot her position. Aurangzeb admired his daughter's stately ways. "Yes," he often remarked, "my daughter Zebunnissa may sometimes forget that I am the Emperor but never that she is an Emperor's daughter."

One of her chief pleasures was to encourage authors and artists. She was a gifted poetess herself and she delighted to help others publish their works. A learned Mahomedan priest once came from Cashmere to consult her about the translation of an old Persian book called *Tafasir-i-Kabir*. The Princess helped him so cordially with the work that when the translation was completed he entitled it *Zebut-ut-tafasir*, and many others dedicated their works to her.

Early in Zebunnissa's life, a secret grief came into her heart. While her father was Viceroy of the Deccan, she often heard of the grand character of a Prince which robbed her heart and made him the Hero of her life, but he was a Hindu ! So she hid her feelings but loved him silently.

This Prince was Sivaji, the Mahratta leader, whose history is one of the most romantic and interesting, who even now figures in the popular imagination as one of India's most glorious heroes. His grandfather Maloji Bhonslay was a respectable Mahratta who lived at Daulatabad. No children had come to bless him and his wife, in spite of their prayers. In vain had they importuned all the Hindu gods to send them a son. Disheartened but persistent, they addressed themselves to Shah Shareef, a Mahomedan *fakir*, renowned for his sanctity. His prayers obtained the desired boon, and they called their son Shah out of compliment to their benefactor, adding the respectful Hindu termination of *ji*.

Shahji Bhonslay in his manhood obtained service with the King of Beejapore, and rose so high in his favour that he became one of the leading nobles in his court.

To Shahji was born a son, Sivaji, and as Bhonslay was frequently absent from his home on warlike expeditions, he entrusted the care and education of his son to a Mahratta Brahman, who instilled into his pupil a fervent love for his country and for Hinduism.

The mother of Sivaji was the daughter of a Mahratta noble who claimed descent from the purest Rajputs. When Sivaji was

in his teens, his father received an extensive *jagir* (grant of land) in the neighbourhood of Poona and the family resided at Tanjore where Shahji Bhonslay owned a rich *zemindary* (estate).

Either the Rajput blood derived from his mother or the military expeditions of his father inspired Sivaji with a warlike spirit, and he longed to achieve fame as a soldier. He ignored the story of his father's miraculous birth, and from boyhood hated the Moslem faith and declared against it. He claimed to be of the warrior caste of Oodeypore and traced his lineage to the Royal Race of the Sun. Early in life he gathered together a band of kindred spirits and sallied forth in quest of adventure. He soon obtained possession of some hill forts and was able to widen his field of enterprise. His fame grew and the Deccan rang with the glory of his exploits.

Accounts of his doings were brought to the Viceregal court of Aurangabad, and often as Zebunnissa, in her early girlhood, leant against her father's knee, she listened to his officers relating stories of the daring Sivaji. She enthroned him King and Hero in her heart, and spent long hours dreaming of him and his wonderful adventures.

When she was about twenty, the court of Daulatabad was in a turmoil of excitement and preparation. Aurangzeb had decided to proceed to Agra and dethrone his father Shah Jahan. He apprehended that Sivaji might secretly help his father Shah Jahan. He accordingly selected some officers of high distinction to bear a message from him to Sivaji, inviting him to join in the march to Agra. Zebunnissa's heart beat fast with hope. Now she might see her Hero, the idol of her dreams.

To her horror and her father's indignation, the messengers returned in sorry plight. Sivaji had received them with scorn. He had read Aurangzeb's letter with contempt, caused it to be tied to the tail of a dog, and had ordered the messengers and the dog to be ignominiously driven from his presence.

Aurangzeb heard the account of this reception with rage, and vowed that he would revenge himself upon the "mountain rat," as he angrily designated Sivaji, at the earliest possible opportunity.

Zebunnissa accompanied her father to Agra, and in his court she became the leading Princess of the day. But in all the occupations of her active life, as a woman of letters and as the mistress of her father's household,

she never forgot her Mahratta Hero. Tales of his doings often stirred the court at Agra and Delhi, and she heard her father indulge in abuses against him, and she trembled for the safety of the Prince if ever he were captured.

The Princess tried hard to hide her love, but her feelings could not be stifled and found expression in verse and song. She was gifted with a sweet voice and was a perfect musician. Her father had had her musical talents well cultivated, and he himself had chosen and furnished a music room for her in the palace at Delhi. It was a large and beautiful room, near a verandah where birds in silver cages trilled. Palms and plants filled the arches, and in the room itself costly silver furniture covered with crimson velvet cushions and musical instruments of every kind proclaimed the Emperor's great taste. Here and there rich crimson carpets edged with gold borders relieved the marble floor, and scattered upon them were bolsters in velvet gold-fringed covers. Zebunnissa loved this room, this and her library were her favourite resorts. She composed songs in Persian, Arabic, and Urdu, for she was mistress of all three languages, and wrote her songs in beautiful neat writing in vellum bound books.

One day Aurangzeb found her seated on a carpet in the great low window which overlooked the garden. The melody of her voice had attracted him as he passed along the corridor, and he had softly opened the door of the music room to surprise his daughter. Her harp was in her hand and a dreamy far-away look in her eyes. She was unaware of her father's entrance, and sang sadly and softly to herself. Aurangzeb stood silent and listened to the refrain of her song.

“Who taught the breeze to make love to the trees ?

‘Twas I, ‘twas I.

“Who taught the bulbul their notes of love ?

‘Twas I, ‘twas I.

“As moths burn their wings round the flame they love,

“So I burn my heart by hearing tales of my love.

“The crushing of the *mende* brings out the red, red juice,

“So the crushing of my heart wrings out my love.

“Ah, this love is a pain and tain would I weep.”

Aurangzeb guessed his daughter's secret. He had often thought her fancy was captured when he saw her eyes dilate and soften at tales of the Mahratta Chief. Now he was sure of it. He turned away and closed the door softly.

Not long after a very daring plot of Sivaji stirred the Emperor's rage, and he sent his best general, Raja Jai Singh, against the Mahrattas.

One afternoon Zebunnissa sat in her dressing-room and her maid dressed her hair.



A shade of sadness upon her face and a dreamy look
in her eyes.

Everything around the Princess spoke of grandeur and luxury. Silver sofas and chairs stood about the room ornamented with brightly embroidered velvet cushions. Gold candelabra adorned each side of the large mirror which reflected Zebunnissa's beautiful face and form and her maid deftly arranging her tresses. A handsome chandelier hung from the ceiling. Scattered about the room were small inlaid tables holding *attar-dans*, scent bottles, flower vases, *pān*, betelnut and spice trays, and ornaments of many descriptions. In the verandah which led to the music room the birds sang gaily, and the scent of flowers came up from the garden beneath. Yet as the Princess sat in the midst of all this luxury and beauty, a shade of sadness rested upon her face and her eyes wore a dreamy abstracted look. Her thoughts were with the Mahratta Prince, and she was hoping he would elude his enemies and gain the safety of one of his mountain strongholds.

The maid had just put the last touches to her hair, and arrayed her in a fresh costume of clinging silk when her favourite lady-in-waiting entered.

" Begum Saheba," she said softly, for long ago she had read her mistress' secret. She too had loved and loved in vain, and

knowledge reveals the hidden thoughts and sorrows of other hearts. "Sivaji is captured and they bring him to Delhi."

"How was he taken?" asked the Princess almost in a whisper.

"Raja Jai Singh's force was too strong for him, and he and his band retreated in haste to a fort. Jai Singh surrounded it, and when Sivaji saw he was beset, he surrendered on condition that his men should go free. Jai Singh granted the condition and the Emperor has just received his despatch, saying that he is making all haste to Delhi with the Mahratta Prince."

Zebunnissa heard the tale in silence. Deep in her heart was the thought : "I shall see him, my Hero, the Prince, and I must help him, if I can."

Some days later Sivaji, captured and conquered, arrived in Delhi, and Aurangzeb held a Darbar to reward Raja Jai Singh for his success and to humble the Mahratta Prince.

Everyone wished to see this great Mahratta Leader, and the *Dewan-i-Am* was thronged. Though the hour was nine-fifteen in the morning, every courtier, officer, noble, and gentleman of the court stood in his place, according to his rank, below the raised alcove

where stood the Throne. This was of the purest white marble and was richly decorated with paintings and low reliefs of flowers and foliage. The Imperial attendants stood on the right and left of the dais, just below it. Facing the Throne, each richly dressed according to his rank and position, were the officers of State, rank behind rank, and all awaiting the Imperial Presence. Behind a screen were the ladies of the Royal household and the wives and daughters of courtiers and nobles. In the first line in this purdahed enclosure sat the Princess Zebunnissa with her sisters, two pretty girls of twenty-three and fifteen, on either side of her. And with them were their aunts, the Emperor's sisters, all daughters of the famous Mumtaza Mahal and each renowned for some special attribute, the Princess Jahanara or "The Ornament of the World"; Roshenara Begum, the "Princess of the Enlightened Mind"; and Suria Banu, the "Splendid Princess" admired for her exquisite loveliness of face and form.

Presently the curtain at the back of the alcove was raised and Aurangzeb entered and in Imperial splendour took his seat on the glorious Peacock Throne. The Royal standard bearers held aloft the golden banners displaying the *tugh* and *qur*, the balls and Yak

cow's tail on a rod which were the insignia of the Moghul Emperors.

It was a scene of unparalleled grandeur and magnificence, and, used as she was to such displays, Zebunnissa shivered at the evidences of her father's might and majesty, and the fate of the brave man which rested in his hands.

No sooner was the Emperor seated the *Burra Bakhshi* or Paymaster-General began the business of the Darbar. Jai Singh, conqueror of the Mahratta Leader, was called before the Throne, and received praises and rewards for his success. Then Aurangzeb ordered the prisoner to be brought forward, and Sivaji, "Champion of the gods," was led to the foot of the dais.

Zebunnissa leaned forward with an excited and nervous heart and gazed for the first time on the stalwart Hero who had unknowingly held her heart for so many years.

Sivaji was now a middle-aged man, but every line of his sturdy well-cut figure spoke of his soldier life. They were struck with his commanding appearance. He was clad in a tunic of a Mahratta warrior. From the *kummerbund* (band) at his waist protruded the handles of pistols and daggers. His

matchlock was slung across his shoulders and his trusty sword hung at his side. He held his shield in his hand, and stood with careless grace and dignity surveying the Moghul court. An expression of watchful determination rested on his face, and his broad forehead told his strength of mind. His black eyes sparkled with scorn, and his whole bearing showed him fearless and undaunted despite his present reverse of fortune.

A murmur of admiration ran round the court, and behind the ladies' screen Zebunnissa pressed her hand against her beating heart. She had often seen fine men at her father's court, but never one like this mountain wanderer. She was now a woman of twenty-eight, with a fully matured and developed mind, and the manhood of the man appealed to her as she scanned every line of his powerful face, swarthy with exposure to wind and weather and the hardships of a soldier's life. The girlish enthusiasm and admiration which had caused her mind to dwell on Sivaji for so many years, and which had made him and her fancy for him the theme of so many of her songs and poems, now broke into a torrent of passionate love and with her soul in her eyes she gazed at him, and deep in her inmost

being she offered her heart to him, Sivaji, the Hindu Prince and Hero.

But a movement in the court roused her. Aurangzeb had noticed the wave of enthusiasm which had swept the court for his vanquished enemy, and he had impatiently signed to the usher to humiliate the Mahratta Prince. In a harsh voice the man ordered Sivaji to bow down before the Throne. Sivaji proudly refused to yield his homage and was hastily and ignominiously hustled from the Darbar Hall.

Aurangzeb sat speechless with rage. Within the ladies' enclosure exclamations of admiration for the Chief's good looks and fearless bearing, with looks of wonder and alarm at his daring refusal to render obeisance to the Emperor, which Zebunnissa heard. Knowing her father's violent and cruel temper, she longed to see the result.

But another stir in the court attracted her attention, and she leaned forward and peered through the screen to see what it meant. Some of the nobles of the court were kneeling before the Throne and pleading for Sivaji. The Emperor heard them wrathfully and angrily left the *Dewan-i-Am*.

Zebunnissa retired to her own apartments, but her mind was restless and she

wandered from room to room till noon when she heard that her father had retired to the Harem. " *Jahapuna*," she said, " it is not regal that you, the Great Moghul *Badshah*, whose name signifies Ornament of the Throne, who have assumed the title of Conqueror of the World, should treat a brave man, a soldier, contemptuously. Mercy and kindness conquer the world more than arms and the sword. It will be a lasting slur to the splendid and renowned court of Delhi if a warrior like the brave Sivaji is unjustly treated."

" My daughter," said Aurangzeb indulgently, " to please you whom I love so dearly I will be merciful. Let Sivaji be converted to Islamism and I will forgive him and place your hand in his in marriage."

The Princess rose from her knees covered with confusion. Scarcely had she dared whisper her love to her own heart, and here was her father acknowledging it aloud and talking of a marriage between her and the Mahratta Prince ! Blushing and ashamed she again retreated to her room.

Her favourite lady-in-waiting, a Begum, who was unknown to her, her secret sympathiser and friend, had witnessed her interview with her father, and next morning gaining admittance to Sivaji acquainted him with the

fact of the Princess' love and admiration and the Emperor's promise and condition. Sivaji received the information in wondering silence. It was sudden and unexpected and for a few minutes he could give no reply. The friendly Begum thought that, stunned with grief at his imprisonment, he had not heard her, and she repeated her words. The Prince rose from his seat and walked to the window. The Begum saw that he brushed away a tear. And she heard him murmur : "Can it be possible that Aurangzeb's daughter has given her heart to me ? She a Moslem and I a Hindu." For a while he remained silent by the window. Then turning to the Begum he said : "Noble lady, you: Princess has done me a great honour. Am I worthy of such love?" And with a heavy sigh he abruptly walked into an inner room.

The next day the court again assembled and the Emperor commanded Sivaji to be brought before him. Once again the Mahratta Prince stood haughtily before the Throne scornfully surveying the Great Moghul. A sign from Aurangzeb and the usher intimated that Sivaji must render his obeisance to the Emperor.

Sivaji answered proudly in a ringing voice : "I was born a Prince and know not how to act like a slave."

Aurangzeb replied angrily : " The vanquished lose their right with their fortune. The sword has made Sivaji my servant and Sivaji must yield his dignity."

At these words the proud Mahratta contemptuously turned his back upon the Emperor. Then a thought seemed to cross his mind and facing the Throne once more he said to Aurangzeb : " Give me your eldest daughter in marriage and I will honour you as a father. But fortune cannot deprive me of my independence of mind and I shall never bend my knee in servitude."

Aurangzeb was enraged at his refusal to pay him homage and his open and daring demand for the Princess' hand in marriage. He burst into one of his royal rages and ordered that the " mountain rat " should be removed from his sight and rigorously imprisoned.

Zebunnissa, who was again viewing the Darbar from behind the ladies' screen, felt heartbroken when she saw her Hero-Prince rudely removed from the court a second time. For a few minutes she lost control of herself and stood like a lifeless statue gazing into space. Her aunts and sisters spoke to her, but she did not hear them. Her sisters put their arms about her, and roused by their

caresses she recovered herself, smiled at them, said a word or two to her aunts, and left the court. But she felt restless and unhappy and wandered around her music room, taking up one instrument after another, and finding no pleasure in any.

Then she wandered to her garden saying to herself : " Why did I see him ? For what reason have the hidden and unknown fires of love been set burning in my heart ? Why, at my father's words yesterday, did hope like a lightning flash illumine my mind ? Why has that hope been torn away to leave me sad and disconsolate ? Will my love find no return ? Since my childhood I have admired and loved him. Has it been all in vain ? But oh ! why did he ask for my hand to-day ? Can it be true that he loves me ? Oh, my hidden love, my aching heart ! I must try and be brave and suffer silently. In tears I shall find relief." Then she burst into tears and sobbed.

A few evenings later at sunset Zebunissa was walking in her garden with some of her ladies-in-waiting. One of them had some pictures of the famous Mahratta Chief and she showed them to the Princess, who took one and looked at it carefully. The others were being handed round and the

ladies were discussing the Hero. Zebunnissa walked away from the group with the picture still in her hand. She wandered to the steps of the lake and stood there. The setting sun shone on her beautiful face, and a faint flush spread over her pale cheeks as she looked at the likeness of Sivaji. Her eyes filled with tears which fell in splashes on his picture. The floating lilies seemed to lift their petals towards her in sympathy for her sorrow, and there was a note of answering tenderness in the breeze. Zebunnissa hung over the Prince's likeness and murmured : "Would that I could see and help you, my love."

A gentle touch on her arm made her start. Her favourite lady-in-waiting stood by her side. "Princess," she whispered, "let me help you. Let me take you to him." Gently and sweetly she told her mistress of her visit to Sivaji and how he had asked : "Am I worthy of such love ?" The Princess heard the account with wonder and hope.

That night when the Emperor was in bed and the palace lay wrapped in silence the favourite lady-in-waiting stole along a corridor which led to the Princess Zebunnissa's rooms. Soon after two closely veiled figures descended a private staircase into the Palace

Garden. These figures disappeared in the darkness of the night and the guards knew naught of them, or of their exit.

Later two veiled women stood at the prison gate and when the jailor opened to their knocking, the foremost one said : " We seek to speak with the Mahratta Sivaji, admit us."

" None can speak with the Mahratta without the Emperor's order," rejoined the keeper and was deaf to all the lady's entreaties. Then her companion who had been standing in the shadow stepped forward. " Open," she commanded imperiously, " I am the Emperor's daughter." The moonlight fell on her face and figure and the jailor recognised the Begum Zebunnissa. He opened the door, and led them within. Next day he returned to his house a richer man but the Princess' gold sealed his lips.

Shortly afterwards Sivaji feigned to be ill, but he recovered marvellously and declared he must honour his gods by distributing sweets to the poor every Thursday. Week after week his gratitude to the gods increased and the baskets of sweets grew so large that at last it required three or four men to carry each. The gates of the prison were thronged with beggars and the air resounded with

praises of Sivaji's bounty and piety. Aurangzeb laughed to hear of it. "Let the mountain rat," he said, "expend his ill-gotten gold. It is good for my people." Zebunnissa smiled. Her aunts and sisters noticed that she had regained her spirits and looked wonderfully lovely, and she always laughed gaily when she heard the descriptions of the Prince's almsgiving.

Week after week the baskets were carried to and from the confectioners'. The jailor took little notice of them and no suspicions were entertained of Sivaji's plans. His faithful followers carefully kept his secret and none knew that a band of Mahratta horsemen waited in patient hiding across the river without the city walls. Did none know ! In her music room Zebunnissa played and sang but often she rose from her seat and walking to the window looked across the river. Then with a smile playing across her lips and her hands tightly clasped across her heart she would seek her favourite lady-in-waiting.

One morning she and the Begum stood together at the window. Were they watching for any one ? There they stood and few words passed between them. Presently the Princess said in a low whisper : "There is some excitement in the palace. Go and see

if you can learn any news." The Begum soon returned. Kneeling beside the Princess she whispered : " All went well. He is safely away."

Sivaji had escaped. He had been carried forth in one of the sweet baskets and had joined his faithful followers across the river. The Princess' clever head had outwitted her father and saved the Hero she loved. Aurangzeb heard of the Mahratta's escape with rage.

Zebunnissa knew she would never see Sivaji again and the day after his flight her father found her sitting by her window with her harp. The tears streamed down her face as she sang :

" I love, that's why I cry,
" I love, that's why I sigh.
" Unless one knows how to love
" Can one know how to cry ?
" One cries in hope to see the loved one
" And so there is joy in tears."

NURJAHAN, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

LET us wander up the stream of time, away, away, to the days of the Great Moghuls, to Lahore on the Ravi, where Akbar, the best and greatest of those great Mahomedan Rulers of India, held his court.

In the verandah of a house not far from the Imperial palace a Persian sat reading a letter. He was one Asiph Khan of an ancient and honourable family, who some years previous had come to India to seek a better fortune at the court of the Moghul. His noble appearance and courtly manners first attracted the notice of Akbar, and afterwards his education and abilities won for him an important position in that Emperor's service, and he finally rose to be one of the chief *omrahs* in Lahore.

The letter he held in his hand was written in Persian and was from a distant relative of his at the court of Persia. Its contents were brief. The writer spoke of

enemies and intrigues and said he thought of coming to India. Could Asiph inform him of what chances of honourable employment were there at Lahore ?

" Well," said Asiph to himself as he came to the end of the scroll, " Khaja Aiass is a man of talents and for such there are many openings here. I must see what I can do for him."

Almost at that very moment Khaja Aiass was bidding farewell to his ancestral home and seeking safety from his enemies in flight. The Shah, His Majesty of Persia, had suddenly raised him to a very high post and Aiass discovered that his enemies had determined secretly to assassinate him. As soon as he learned of their evil design he put together a few things and, when night fell, he and his wife started on their long journey to India.

The road was long and difficult. Azizam Bibi was in delicate health and they could proceed but slowly. Their small stock of provisions became less, day by day. The little money they had was quite expended, and the horse on which Azizam rode was gaunt and emaciated and hobbled painfully under its burden. Aiass walked slowly by its side striving to cheer and encourage his wife.

They had crossed the Great Solitudes or Desert and one day came to a rocky place. As Khaja Aiass described it he said to his wife : " If I mistake not, *Piari* (beloved), this defile of rocks is but a day's journey from Candahar, where we will surely find some kind people who will help us."

Azizam heard in silence. Her comely features were haggard and thin with anxiety and suffering. They had reached the shadow of the rocks when she spoke :

" Husband, lord, I can endure it no longer. My hour draws near. I must dismount and rest."

" Alas ! alas ! " sighed Aiass, " would that here we could find some house to shelter us, some hand to relieve our wants. But here is naught but barren rocks."

" Ah ! why were you not satisfied to remain in your own land ? What possessed you to seek fortune so far ? " cried his wife.

" Beloved, my enemies were many and I had but few friends there," Aiass answered in a pathetic voice. " If we can but reach Lahore all will be well. My kinsman Asiph will surely help us."

" If, if," echoed Azizam, " and in the meantime we may die. But my hour is come so we must halt. Oh ! stop, stop !" she cried. " I cannot bear this a moment longer."

Aiass lifted her from the horse and led her to a sheltered spot behind a rock. Here, alone and untended, poor Azizam gave birth to a daughter.

In the days of waiting which followed, Aiass often paced the spaces between the rocks calling upon Heaven to help them in their distress, but he reflected sadly that there was but little hope for himself or his wife. Then why burden themselves with a third life which they could not succour ? The feeble infant whose cries so often rose on the desert air would only be an additional anxiety and trouble. If they could but abandon it they might struggle on alone and perhaps they might reach some small village near.

They were in a pitiable condition. After a miserable night, when the crying of the babe for food, and the mother's pale and weak appearance had worn Aiass' spirit to the last thread of endurance, he drew nearer to his wife determined to make one last effort. She lay looking miserably weak against a rock with the baby on her arm.

"Wife," he said, "we must tarry here no longer. We must journey on."

"We have now the child to share our misery," she answered feebly. "Oh! that I had a little milk for her."

Gently he hinted to her, as he had done so often before, that it might be well for them to abandon the infant and strive to preserve their own lives. His suggestion was again met with horror.

"But you are right, we must proceed," and Azizam struggled to her feet and staggered to the horse. Her husband assisted her to the saddle, and for a few yards they proceeded in silence. But the effort proved too much for the suffering wife, and presently she said in panting tones: "I can scarce hold myself upon the saddle. Kindly carry the child."

Aiass relieved her of the tiny burden and they continued a little further in painful silence. Then Aiass stumbled and fell. Azizam wept pitifully to see her husband thus overcome, but had not the strength to go to his assistance.

"Beloved, beloved!" sobbed Aiass. "Let us leave the child here. We cannot possibly save her life, and may lose our own."

Azizam shuddered. But death seemed imminent and at last, overcome by her husband's entreaties and arguments, she stifled the anguish of her mother-love, and reluctantly consented to leave the child.

"But not on the rocks, not on the bare rocks!" she begged him. "Some wild beast will devour her. Take my shawl and wrap my sweet babe, my wee girl. It is all I can give her. Had the child been anybody's but mine she would have been saved and lived. Oh, I am the most unfortunate, miserable mother," and she began to sob.

Aiass dragged himself to the tree and bound the babe to an outstretching branch. Then, in silence, he and his wife continued their weary journey.

Azizam's head was turned back to where the baby hung suspended from the branch. At last distance hid the tree and, with a miserable sigh, the mother covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly. Her anguish could not be controlled and her sorrow soon broke forth in wild cries. The sounds forced themselves into poor Aiass' ears. He roused his wearied senses and looked back to his wife. Swaying to and fro upon the saddle she wept with unrestrained grief.

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"Loved one! loved one!" And Aiass halted the failing horse and stepped to her side. She flung herself from the saddle, and fell prostrate on the hard ground.

"Oh, my babe, my babe!" she cried in an agonized voice. "Husband, lord, little chance of life is there for us. Let us return to our child and all die together."

Aiass endeavoured to soothe and comfort her, but in vain. And the pangs of fatherhood were piercing and wringing his heart. Soon his tears were mingled with hers for their child.

"Alas, alas!" he wept, "is there no hope? Must we all die here, in this lonely spot?"

"Let us return to the babe and all die together," Azizam said again. "Oh, that I had never left my child."

Aiass turned the horse's head but he had not the strength left to help Azizam upon it. Leaving it therefore to wander at will, they returned to the tree. When they reached it they saw a large serpent coiled round the branch and round the child, its head was raised and it seemed about to strike when their approach distracted it, and it uncoiled itself and left the tree. Aiass'

terror gave him strength and he succeeded in killing it, breaking its body in twain with his thick walking stick.

Then he untied the shawl and carried the baby back to his wife. But to his grief he found her senseless and as she lay so still and white he thought her dead. He placed the baby on her arm and, seated beside her, he addressed her sadly :

“ Ah, my beautiful one ! are you gone ? At home you had servants to serve you, a soft bed to lie upon, and every comfort that I could give was yours. Here, your weary body rests upon a hard rock, in a lonely place, and there is not a drop of water to give you nor a morsel of food, and no sign of any help. Ah, my wife, my wife, it is sad to see you thus ! ”

He wept aloud in his grief for he loved his wife. But a feeble touch attracted his attention and he saw that it was Azizam’s hand that sought to rouse him. Her eyes were open and she was smiling at him. Somewhat comforted, he ceased weeping and raising her to a more comfortable position, he took her hands in his and together they quietly waited for the death which they felt sure must come.

They had not waited thus many minutes when three horsemen entered the defile of rocks. The leader, an elderly man of prosperous appearance, shouted : "There is the tree !" and dismounting strode rapidly towards it. As he reached it he again shouted aloud, and his companions heard his exclamation : "And here is the snake."

One of them ran to his master's side while the other held the horse. The snake which Aiass had killed lay beneath the tree, its body severed in two portions. The stranger examined them carefully and then remarked to his companion : "They are quite fresh. It has just been killed. We must seek him whose hand has saved my life. I must reward him."

A wealthy merchant of Candahar, he sometimes journeyed to and from Lahore with his merchandise. His camels and goods were all ready to set out on the morrow. While he slept a vision disturbed him. Throughout the night the dream came again and again. He saw himself in a rocky mountain, and growing there was a large tree. Beneath this tree a snake of terrible dimensions attacked and pursued him. He tried in vain to strike it dead, and as its fangs buried themselves in his flesh he awakened, and he trembled with fear.

When morning came, he summoned his officials and friends and expressed his wish to abandon his journey and told them of the dream of the former night. But as everything was ready his friends told the merchant that it was but a dream. So, after much persuasion, the party started on the journey.

The merchant said : " I have a vague recollection of seeing in my boyhood just such a place at some distance from here at the entrance to the Great Solitudes. I shall ride thither and search for it."

All arguments and persuasions were of no avail. His dream had obsessed the merchant, and he gave his camel-men orders to proceed to Lahore, saying he would overtake them on the way. A trusted servant was ordered to prepare to accompany him on horseback to the desert. An astrologer friend went with him. Accordingly the horses were soon ready and the merchant and his two companions set out on their quest, and arrived there and found a dead snake as was seen.

In their quest for the killer of the snake they came upon Aiass, his wife, and their child behind a rock.

The merchant accosted Aiass : "Knowest thou aught of a large serpent that lies dead under the tree, and who killed it?"

"I did," answered Aiass. "It was coiled round my child and I killed it."

The stranger said : "Noble Sir, I feel that in killing this serpent you have saved my life," and he related his dream. "I would reward you. What is there I can do to assist you, for I can see that sorrow is thine."

"Give us food and drink, kind Sir, and help us," answered Aiass. "My poor wife is dying of starvation." The merchant and his companions had food enough to last a day or two, and they hastened to relieve the sufferers. Tended and succoured by this strangely found friend Aiass and his wife were soon able to proceed on their journey.

The history of their sufferings, the birth of the child, the serpent and the merchant's dream, all made the astrologer ponder and he asked permission to cast the infant's horoscope. Aiass laughed at the mere suggestion, but consented. The astrologer predicted that the babe born in the desert and almost abandoned by her parents would live

to be a great ruler, and would be the most wonderful woman of her time.

Aiass and his wife heard this prediction with amusement. "Here we are almost perished in the deserted rocks! Have we the hope of any future that you speak of, and the child to live to rule? It sounds like a fairy tale, an impossibility! We pray only that the child may live."

"Nevertheless, what I have foretold will come to pass," answered the astrologer. "The stars never err. Mark well my words, Sir, your little daughter will be a great Empress some day, and you will live to see her grace a throne."

Aiass with his wife and child travelled through the rocky mountains and passed several villages, where they stopped to beg for a little food. Thus they journeyed for some days. At last they reached Lahore, fatigued with the hardships of the journey. After a few days' stay there Aiass began to look for a post and went to Asiph Khan in hopes of finding some work.

Asiph Khan, the *Omrah* of Lahore, received his kinsman with cordiality and Aiass undertook the duties of secretary to his countryman. It was not long before the

Omrah found an opportunity of presenting Aiass to the Emperor.

Akbar's father Humafoon had been sheltered at the court of Persia when he fled from his enemies in India. Khaja Aiass' father then held an important office under the Shah of Persia and he was of great service to Humafoon. Akbar knew of this and he was delighted to have an opportunity of showing his gratitude to his father's friend. Ere long the Persian noble received command of five thousand horse, and gradually rose to be Master of the Imperial household. In this capacity his services were so greatly appreciated that Akbar appointed him to the highest office in the Empire, Lord High Treasurer, and bestowed upon him in full Darbar the Urdu title of that appointment, *Actimad-ud-Dowlah*.

The babe, whose coming into the lives of her parents had made such a wonderful change in their fortunes, was named Mihrunnissa, Sun of Women. She blossomed like a lovely flower and her mind unfolded with the beauty of her face and figure. A mind singularly gifted and able, and fit companion of such a radiant face and graceful form. As the sun eclipses the stars, so all through her life, Mihrunnissa's beauty eclipsed that of all

women. Among the many children who played in the Royal Gardens at Lahore she was queen.

An apt pupil, Mihrunnissa learned all that her refined and highly cultured parents could teach her. Akbar's was the most luxurious capital in the world and there was nothing lacking to enable Mihrunnissa to attain that perfection of beauty and talent which was later to lay Hindustan at her feet. She often accompanied her mother to the Royal zenana and won the affection of Akbar's eldest Begum, Rokia Sultana, and of the celebrated Jodh Bai, the mother of the heir Prince Salem. Often in these visits she sang and danced for the many Queens and delighted them with the sparkle of her girlish charm and personality.

The fame of her grace and loveliness became well known in the country, and as she budded into a wonderful maidenhood her mother grew anxious for her safety. She counselled her husband often that they must wed their eldest child early. "Her beauty is too remarkable to escape attention," she said.

At the court of Akbar was a Turkomanian nobleman of high family. His original name had been Afta Jillo, and under it he

had served the King of Persia with great renown. Then wandering to India he had found service with Akbar. Here, too, his bravery gained fame. He once encountered a lion and fought and killed it singlehanded. When the Emperor heard of this feat he called Afta Jillo to court, praised him for his intrepidity, and bestowed upon him the title of Shere Afghan or "Overthrower of the Lion," and by this name the Turkemanian was ever after known in India.

To this most accomplished and powerful noble, who was so esteemed and so high in favour at the court of Akbar, Aiass and Azizam betrothed their lovely daughter.

II.

In Akbar's reign a wonderful *Mela* or Fancy Bazar was held on the first night of the New Year or *Naoroz*. This fair was held in the zenana garden of the Imperial palace. To it came the wives of all the courtiers, Rajas, Zemindars, and Taluqdars from all over the Empire. They brought with them the productions of their own provinces and held stalls for the sale of their goods. The purchasers were the Emperor and the Queens and Begums of the Royal household. The only man admitted to this *Naoroz Bazar* was Akbāī

himself. Here he might view the lovely ones of his Empire who at all other times were veiled from his gaze. Many a petition was made known and granted here on the *Naorati* (New Year's Night).

Azizam Bibi was noted for the distillation of *attar* of roses. The old year was drawing to its close and Sultana Rokia asked her to hold a stall in the *Naorozi Bazar* and display the wonderful perfume to the beauties who would gather there. Azizam consented.

On *Naorati* she and Mihrunnissa, richly dressed, occupied places in their stall. The lights were lit and the fun of the fair was soon in full swing. Presently the word passed round that the *Badshah* was in the garden. Akbar lingered at many a stall. Attended by his favourite Queen he strolled here and there forgetting his cares and burden of Empire and admiring the muslins of Dacca, the embroidery of Cashmere, and the cunning productions of his great domains.

At last he came near the stall where Azizam Bibi stood talking to her Royal friend, Rokia Begum. The Sultana approached her Royal husband and said : “ *Jahapuna*, I beg of you to come and purchase some of the *attar* that the wife of the *Actimad-ud-Dowlah* has so cleverfully extracted.”



Azizam Bibi was noted for the distillation of *Attar*.



She plunged her pretty feet into the cool water.

Akbar drew near and purchased for its weight in gold all the *attar* Azizam Bibi had to offer. His fatherly gaze fell upon Mihrunnissa, then in her seventeenth year, and calling her to his side he congratulated her mother on her betrothal and approaching marriage.

"Shere Afghan is the finest man in my court," he said warmly, "and had I so fair a daughter I would not hesitate to place her hand in his. Such beauty as yours, my child," he added, looking kindly at Mihrunnissa, "needs a strong and powerful protector. God be your protector and help you to be a good wife to Shere who deserves the best the world can give."

Mihrunnissa blushed, and when the Emperor passed on, she slipped away from her mother's side. She knew that in the Palace Gardens was a fountain. Here she sped. Casting off her dainty gold-embroidered slippers, she raised her silken skirt and trousers and plunged her pretty feet into the cool water. The moonlight fell on her lovely laughing face. The close-fitting jewelled cap which Persian maidens wear sat lightly on her luxuriant tresses, which hung to her waist in two heavy plaits entwined with pearls. Betrothal and marriage were far from her. She still dreamt and lingered in her childhood.

And she laughed at the remembrance of the Emperor's serious words.

As she stood there the Crown Prince Salem walked in the Royal Gardens. His wife Reba was engaged in the fair. There was none to amuse the Prince. He envied his father the Emperor his privilege of seeing the *Mela*. He determined that when he became *Badshah* he would multiply the number of these *Bazars*. And as he dreamed and planned he approached the fountain. There the lovely vision of Mihrunnissa standing ankle-deep in the water greeted him.

“ Standing with reluctant feet
“ Where the brook and river meet,
“ Womanhood and childhood fleet.”

Her beauty enthralled him. Never had he seen such wonderful radiance of face and form. Breathless, he stood and gazed at her. Was she a dream, a vision, or a reality ?

But his shadow had crossed hers in the water and she was aware of his presence. Stepping from the fountain she dropped her skirts over her pretty feet, and raised her eyes to his face.

“ How beautiful ! How beautiful ! ” he murmured as he met her eyes and saw the full perfection of her face. And as her eyes met his she crossed the mystic brook

and floated out on to the river of her marvellous womanhood, and nearer to her came the star of her destiny which the astrologer had seen in the desert so long ago.

The Prince broke the silence. "Fair lady, who art thou? Some fairy dropped from Paradise?"

She laughed gaily. The compliment to her beauty and the Prince's enraptured gaze sent the blood to her face, enhancing its charm. Some strange affinity attracted her and Salem to each other. Her musical refined voice replied: "No, Sir, I am only the daughter of the *Actimad-ud-Dowlah*."

"The daughter of the *Actimad*! Then thou art the wondrous Mihrunnissa, and rightly art thou named. How is it that I have never seen thee before?"

She knew and yet she knew it not. For ever at her feet lay the heart of Salem, Prince of India, one day to be its ruler. Something in their souls had met and she, who was destined to one day satisfy the inner longings of his being, and sit by his side on the Imperial Throne, laughed at him under the moonlight and answered:

"I know not. But who art thou, noble Sir?"

"Salem, son of Akbar," he replied, wondering if she really was unaware of his identity as she stood near him by the fountain.

"The Saheb-alam!" she exclaimed, and bent to pay him homage.

"We have met, simple man and maid, in a garden," he told her. "Let us wander a while under the trees and forget the court and its ceremonies."

For a brief while they lingered and then Mihrunnissa said: "I must return to my mother," and she swiftly fled to the garden-door and disappeared into the zenana.

Intoxicated with her beauty Salem longed to see her again and sat dreaming of her and how he could meet her. One day his old nurse surprised him in one of these reveries and with the privilege of a foster-mother she asked: "Son, why so thoughtful?"

Salem answered with a question: "Dost know the daughter of the *Actimad-ud-Dowlah?*"

"Yes, I know her well," the old woman replied, and looking at him keenly she added "what wouldest thou of her? She is betrothed in marriage to the great Shere Afghan."

"I love her," answered Salem, "and nurse-mother, you must help me in this. I wish to write her and you are to carry the letter for me."

"But Shere Afghan?" answered the old woman.

"Shall not his suit give way to that of the Saheb-alam?" asked the Prince contemptuously. "Bear this message for me and bring me back the answer."

More than one letter was written and exchanged. Azizam Bibi was ambitious for her daughter and Mihrunnissa was ambitious also. But the nurse was frightened. Shere Afghan and Aiass were high in favour and too powerful to risk displeasing. When Salem confided to his foster-mother a formal offer of marriage to the lovely Mihrunnissa, she let her scruples overcome her and deliver the letter into the hands of the girl's father, telling him its purport.

Aiass was much troubled. He sought his wife and told her of the letter which had come into his hands. She informed him of the secret courtship which was going on and that all would be well. Aiass understood his wife's ambitions. But he also understood the complexity of a Royal intrigue, and he

was a high-souled man, and moreover his word was pledged to Shere Afghan. He summoned his daughter and spoke to her: "Hear me, my child," he said gravely, when he realised that her heart was captured and that she too thought of the high position of her lover. "It is a very great honour for you to be admired by the Saheb-alam, and perhaps many fathers would give their consent to his proposal. But all I seek is your honour and happiness. This offer comes from the Prince alone and not as it should from his father the Emperor. And remember, my daughter, my word is pledged. You are the betrothed wife of Shere Afghan, a noble and high-minded man. As his wife you will occupy an assured and honourable position. But if you accept the Prince your lot in life may be very different. He is already married and it is arranged that the Princess Reba, who is the heir Khushru's mother, and very dear to Akbar, shall always have the first place in the *Shahzada*'s harem. We know not how many more wives the Prince may not marry. You may therefore be but one of many. Think well, girl, before you spoil your own life and break my pledge."

Mihrunnissa realised the truth of her father's words, and her proud spirit recoiled at the thought of dishonour. She bade the nurse convey the letter back to the *Shahzada*.

and say "that the daughter of the *Actimad* was already betrothed in marriage to the great Shere Afghan."

Salem received this message with disdain and wrote to his Royal father and confessed everything. Akbar read it patiently but refused to interfere. Shere Afghan and Aiass were both trusted and tried servants of the Empire. Salem could offer Mihrunnissa but a secondary place in his harem. Her beauty, cleverness, and her father's position were deserving of more. Aiass did well for his daughter to match her with one so noble as Shere Afghan. And Akbar finally counselled his son to seek his sweet and beautiful wife Reba and forget the charms of Mihrunnissa.

But vain were the monarch's words. Salem sent for Shere Afghan and asked him to invent an excuse and annul the betrothal. Shere declined. His honour was pledged. Then Salem had recourse to intimidations and threats. They had no effect on Shere Afghan or Aiass, but they resolved to hasten on the marriage. Akbar approved of their decision and, as a mark of his Royal favour, he appointed Shere Afghan to a high office in Bengal and bestowed upon him a rich *jagir* (grant of land) in Burdwan, advising him to take up his new duties immediately after his nuptials and to take his young bride away

there with him. Akbar also considered his son, and appointed him to a command in Allahabad and ordered him to go there without any delay.

Salem pleaded with his mother, the Princess Jodh Bai, to overcome the Emperor's scruples and induce him to force Shere Afghan to relinquish his claim on the lovely Mihrunnissa so that he (Salem) might marry her.

" My son," answered Queen Jodh Bai, " forget not the Rajput blood which flows through your veins from me. With us honour is high and dear. Your father has acted wisely. But he is half a Rajput too. Be true to your birth, and your high position, and forget the lovely Mihrunnissa. She is betrothed to another. Try and forget her. Have you not a sweet wife to charm and brighten your life ? Where could you find a purer or more unselfish heart than the mother of your son Khushru ? Oh, you are a lucky boy, my Salem. Be happy with your Reba and forget the wonderful face of the *Actimad*'s daughter."

" Mother," answered Salem, " your words are wise and good, but to forget that one loves is not easy. There was some response in Mihrunnissa's heart to the adoration she

has enkindled in mine. Our sacred books point to union when two hearts are attracted to each other, and the chain of mysterious affinity and unconquerable love binds her and me together. Her matchless beauty is made for a throne, and if it lies in my power I shall place the Imperial crown on her brow. Reba is pure and unselfish, I know, but she is more saint than woman. Mother, a good woman like you cannot perhaps understand the love that has possessed me for Mihrunnissa, and we will speak no more of it. My father has ordered me to Allahabad, and my escort awaits me. Farewell, mother."

The marriage of Mihrunnissa with Shere Afghan was celebrated in her father's house in Lahore and, the festivities over, she accompanied her husband to Bengal. But the Prince did not forget her and there were those at court who wished to stand well with the future Emperor and were glad to further on his present wishes. In his new appointment Shere Afghan found himself hampered with secret enemies, and so difficult did his position become that he finally resigned the office he held, and retired to his estate in Burdwan where he lived the quiet life of a country gentleman.

Mihrunnissa's lofty mind took a keen delight in the companionship of her devoted

and chivalrous husband. Between them was trust and sympathy, and he found in her a faithful and unselfish wife. The fancy which the Prince had awakened slept and Mihrunissa knew not that it still lay there in her heart. She admired and respected her husband and the birth of a little daughter drew them closer together. Eleven happy, uneventful years passed by.

A day came when couriers bore to Bengal the news that Akbar, the great and good Emperor under whose golden rule India had enjoyed a long period of peace, prosperity, and union, had passed away.

Salem ascended the Throne of the Moghuls under the title of Jahangir, "Conqueror of the World." For forty days and nights after his accession high festival reigned at Agra, now the capital. From all parts of the Empire Rajas and nobles rode to Akbar's city to witness the crowning of his son, and returning to their homes told of the scenes of unwonted splendour and the magnificence of the reign which had now begun.

It was not long before Shere Afghan was summoned to appear before the Imperial Presence. He obeyed the mandate with simple loyalty and, accompanied by Mihrunissa, he journeyed to Agra. No thought

of suspicion crossed his mind. Time had erased from his memory the Prince's desire for Mihrunnissa and it never once entered his noble soul that the Emperor had preserved the love of another's wife in his heart. Shere Afghan was nobility itself and he could not even dream of base designs on the part of his sovereign and liege-lord.

But the Royal lover was a man of another mould. Mihrunnissa's face and form were so wonderful in their beauty that once seen she could never be forgotten, or her image effaced from memory, and some curious affinity heightened her marvellous charms in Jahangir's eyes. During the eleven years which had elapsed he had kept the memory of her fresh in his mind. But a newly-crowned monarch must be careful not to offend the prejudices of his subjects, and Jahangir was crafty.

He received Shere Afghan with cordiality and graciousness. And when he saw that no suspicions of himself had entered the Turkomanian's noble mind he had him skilfully sounded as to whether he would divorce his wife. The suggestion came as from an evil mind with which the Emperor had no connection. The high-spirited and honourable Shere rejected the unwelcome news and was ready to stake his life on his wife's

virtue. Jahangir saw he must be careful. Shere was a popular hero and there were too many partisans of his at court.

Jahangir had not long been Emperor when he moved his court to Delhi, and there Shere was long detained on one pretext after another. Fresh honours were conferred upon him. The suggester of the divorce had been dismissed from court in apparent disgrace, and all uneasiness was dispelled from Shere's mind. Mihruṇnissa was with him and they were devoted to each other and happy.

One day news was brought to Delhi that a tiger of extraordinary ferocity and size had been discovered in a small forest near by. The Emperor seized this opportunity. He immediately ordered a Royal chase, and attended by Shere Afghan and all the nobles of his court he proceeded in State to the place.

A circle of several miles in circumference was formed round the tiger's hiding place, and slowly this ring of humanity closed in around the entrapped animal. Flaming firebrands, and beating of drums roused the great monster and its mighty roaring thrilled the crowding courtiers, many of whom wished themselves safely back in Delhi.

Jahangir hastened to the spot where the tiger snarled and shook the enclosing barrier. Smiling benignly on the distinguished nobles who surrounded him, he let his eyes rest on Shere Afghan, and asked in a loud voice: "Who amongst you is so intrepid as to advance alone against this tiger?"

The courtiers were aghast at the Imperial challenge and looked from one to another until with one accord all eyes met and were riveted on Shere Afghan. The Turkomanian stood silent. Modesty deterred him from snatching glory from his younger fellow-nobles, but he determined that if none volunteered he would claim the honour of slaying the beast.

The silence was broken by three *omrahs* who desired to gain the Emperor's favour. Casting themselves at his feet they begged permission to try in turn to overcome the terrible animal in single combat. But their voices roused Shere Afghan's pride. Now three had come forward where he had expected none to volunteer they could, according to the rules of chivalry, insist on their prior right, and he, the "Overthrower of the Lion," must stand by and lose his renown as the first hero in the Empire.

Jahangir delayed his permission. He was disappointed that Shere had not volunteered

and his throat choked with anger. But he controlled and concealed his rage and was just about to speak to the *omrahs* at his feet when the commanding figure of the Turkomanian stepped out of the circle and Jahangir's heart rose with hope.

Shere Afghan spoke in a clear ringing voice and all heard his daring challenge. "To attack an animal with weapons is unmanly and unfair. God has given to men, as well as to tigers, limbs and sinews. Man has in addition reason to guide his valour and strength."

The three *omrahs* heard in dismay. "No, no," they objected. "All men are inferior to the tiger in strength. He can be overcome with steel alone."

To this Shere Afghan responded proudly : "With the *Badshah's* permission I will convince you of your mistake." And casting his sword and shield upon the ground, he prepared to enter the enclosure. Jahangir, secretly elated, caught him by the arm and said : "No, no, Shere, this is more than I ask."

The honour of Shere Afghan was now at stake. Nothing could deter him from his purpose. Respectfully disengaging himself

from the Emperor's grasp, he said : " Allah defend me," and vaulting across the barrier he faced the tiger.

Astonishment held the spectators dumb. All admired the courage of the man but all shuddered at the folly of the deed. Jahangir forgot his cruel design as he watched the undaunted Shere slap the tiger on its cheek. The enraged animal sprang forward with a fierce snarl and the man closed with it. In breathless silence Emperor and court watched the awful struggle between the unarmed man and savage beast. When, mangled and torn himself, Shere Afghan hurled the vanquished and throttled animal from him, the plaudits of the courtiers deafened Jahangir.

Mihrunnissa heard of her husband's terrible exploit with pride, but when she received his bleeding and lacerated body she feared he would never recover. During the long weeks when she devotedly nursed him back to life and strength strange whispers and messages came to her. At first she could not grasp their import but later her soul sickened within her, and when Shere Afghan was able to listen, she told him of her fears and begged him to let them return to Burdwan. Shere made light of all she told him, declared that what had been repeated

to her was idle gossip, that the Emperor was their best friend, and assured her of his own trust and confidence.

When Shere was well enough to venture abroad he appeared at court to pay his respects to Jahangir. The Emperor embraced him, saying, "Well did my father name you Shere Afghan," congratulated him on his recovery, and requested him to attend court next day.

On the following day as Shere Afghan approached the palace in his palanquin, an elephant from the Royal *feelkhana* came tearing madly down the road. Shere Afghan commanded his palki-bearers to turn back and seek shelter in the lane from which they had just emerged. Instead, they dropped the palki and fled. Shere had just time to extricate himself from the fallen palanquin and draw the short sword he always wore at his side. With a mighty effort he struck at the elephant and severed its trunk at the root. The huge animal turned with a terrible scream of pain, staggered and crashed to the earth in its death agony.

Jahangir was watching from a window in the palace. He retreated hurriedly, once more realising angrily that his noble foe had escaped his designs.

The brave Turkomanian cleansed his sword and continued his way to the Presence. Arrived there, he saluted the Emperor, and told him of his encounter with the enraged elephant, and that he had slain it, apologising for the destruction of one of the Royal beasts, but adding : " It was solely in defence of my life, Your Majesty."

Alarmed and humbled by the man's courage, and his unsuspicious bearing, Jahan-gir hastily dismissed him from his presence.

Shere Afghan walked slowly home, but once again the fame of his prowess had preceded him, and a garbled account of how the elephant had been purposely excited and released, and how the palki-bearers had been bribed to run away if an elephant perchance attacked their master.

Mihrunnissa's soul stood still with horror. What did this persecution mean ? No thought of unfaithfulness to the husband she so respected and admired ever crossed her mind. Proud and high-spirited, she shrank at the mere hint of her virtue being assailed. When her husband entered she first assured herself that he was unhurt, and then told him that this had been a plot against his life, and besought him to let them return to Burdwan. Shere Afghan at first laughed

at her fears but Mihrunnissa was insistent and her pleadings at last prevailed upon her husband. He yielded and promised her that he would the very next day ask permission of the *Badshah* to return to his home.

The vague rumours of the Emperor's bribes and cunning disturbed him for his wife's sake. He reflected that if danger was afoot for her he could best protect and guard her in his own home, so that evening he again attended the Presence and begged permission to return to his estate in Bengal. Jahangir made no demur. His guilty conscience made him uncomfortable in the Turkomanian's company and he grasped the opportunity of removing him from his court.

Shere Afghan and Mihrunnissa soon reached their peaceful home and in the tranquil six months which followed their return she forgot the strange whispers she had heard at Delhi. But her hope that all had been wild exaggeration was soon destroyed.

The whispers of the court had grown into open talk at Delhi and it was no secret there that the Emperor wished to marry the beautiful Mihrunnissa. Among the many who strove for the Royal favour was a man named Kuttub. He was nominated to be

Suba or Governor of Bengal. His wicked self determined to win further advancement for himself by compassing what the Emperor himself had failed to bring about. Kuttub hired a band of ruffians to attack and murder Shere Afghan whenever and wherever opportunity offered. Some of the band were admirers of the fearless nobleman, and they sent him anonymous warnings. Shere Afghan yielded to Mihrunnissa's entreaties and ceased to walk or ride about but, confident in his own prowess, refused to guard his house.

One night after the servants had gone to their own rooms and Shere Afghan was alone in his study he was attacked. Some of the band had contrived to enter the house stealthily after dusk and conceal themselves in the room. Shere had sat reading for some time and had then fallen asleep on a couch in his study. The hired assassins crept from their hiding-places and surrounded him. But the nobility of the sleeping face overcame one of them, and he said to his comrades :

" Are we jackals that we should fall in numbers on one man ? Have we not the Emperor's sanction ? Let us behave like men, awaken him, and pit ourselves against him in single combat."

The first notes of his voice had awakened Shere who now leapt from the couch and shouted : " Well spoken." Then, snatching up a sword the dauntless man took up a position in a corner, and challenged his would-be murderers to come forward. Several were wounded in the desperate struggle. More than one lay weltering in his life's blood and finally all who were able fled. The old man whose words had awakened Shere and who had taken no active part in the fight alone remained. Shere thanked him for his manly behaviour, rewarded him, and told him to bear the news of the fight to Kuttub.

The fame of this exploit spread abroad and Mihrunnissa's husband was more than ever the hero of the day. But in spite of his marvellous escapes his fate overshadowed him, and Mihrunnissa spent many an anxious hour.

One evening, as she and he walked in their garden in the moonlight, she stopped near a rosebush and plucked one of the blossoms, and gave it him to smell its sweetness. The moonlight fell full on her lovely face and, as he took the rose, Shere said to her :

" Queen of my heart ! You are too beautiful for such a quiet home as mine. You need a palace to frame your beauty."

A wave of pain passed over Mihrunnissa's face and she exclaimed in astonishment: "Oh my husband, my dear husband, what makes you speak so strangely! I am quite, quite happy with you, I want no palace, and my only wish is that the *Badshah* would not think of me. It hurts me so that you should make such a remark, and I implore of you never again to say such a cruel thing. Promise me you will not, my dear husband."

Shortly after this Kuttub came to Burdwan to inspect certain estates. On the day of his arrival Shere Afghan rode to meet him. Mihrunnissa had begged her husband not to go, that there might be another plot. He assured her that Kuttub's visit was a purely official one and added that he must go out of loyalty to the Emperor whose representative Kuttub was. Mihrunnissa watched her husband depart with a sad heart.

Kuttub received Shere with great politeness and for a time rode by his side. Then, suddenly the *Suba* stopped, said he must enter Burdwan in State and ordered up his elephant. Shere stood respectfully by, attended by two of his servants who had accompanied him. Presently one of the pike-men pretended that Shere obstructed the way and rudely struck that nobleman's horse on

the flank and attempted to drive him forward. Shere was enraged at the insult and clearly saw that this was an attempt on his own life. He turned upon the pikeman who fell on his knees and declared he had only obeyed the *Suba*'s orders. Swords were drawn and a fight ensued. Shere spurred his horse up to the elephant and struck the *Suba* dead, but he himself was soon after slain by the Governor's followers.

The news of the affray and her husband's death was carried to Mihrunnissa, who sent for the body of her husband and prepared for the mourning obsequies. But soon the officer in charge of the *Suba*'s army arriving claimed justice for the murder of Kuttub.

Mihrunnissa behaved with great dignity and submitted to a guard at her door. The news was conveyed to Delhi and the courier returned with the Imperial orders that the estate of Shere Afghan was to be confiscated and that Shere's widow was to be conveyed as a prisoner to Delhi to answer for her husband's crime.

Mihrunnissa resented this and at first resisted the order but finding that it would be useless she consented to journey to Delhi. Arrived there she was taken ^{four hours} to the palace

where she was received with great tenderness by Sultana Rokia, Jahangir's step-mother, and the eldest Queen of Akbar. Mihrunnissa refused to remain in the palace. Information of her arrival and refusal to occupy the apartments assigned her was conveyed to the Emperor in Darbar who ordered her to be brought before him.

Her palki was carried to the Darbar Hall and set within the doorway, and Mihrunnissa was asked to come forth. She walked with bowed head to the dais where Jahangir sat. He watched her coming. Never had he seen her again since the moonlit *Naoroz* night. Her floating draperies veiled the advancing figure, but they could not conceal its charms. The lissome slight grace of girlhood was gone, and the stately lines of a matured and beautiful womanhood were revealed and veiled by the white gauzy folds of her widow's dress. Bereft of jewels two slender hands held her veil around her. The mysterious charm of her personality moved Jahangir. As she came to a standstill at the foot of his Throne he bent somewhat forward and addressed her :

" Fair lady, I am told you refuse to occupy the apartments appointed for you in the suite of my mother Rokia Begum. This

is but a temporary arrangement. I have brought you to Delhi to be married, and to be happy here."

At the sound of his voice she had slightly raised her head and at these words she lifted it up proudly and gazed at him with wide-open surprised eyes. No smile dimpled her cheek as on that delicious night twelve years ago. The girlish coquetry of her eyes was gone, but a fuller, more glorious beauty shone before him. Pale and motionless as a statue she stood at the steps of the Throne, her dark eyes sombre with grief, sorrow stamped on every line of her face, but her beauty was undimmed, and Jahangir was more than ever filled with the desire to call her "mine." He and those about him gazed at her in speechless admiration.

Now her voice sounded in his ears and he listened. "*Hazrat* (Majesty), I cannot live in your palace. Do not speak to me of marriage, please. My husband has been cruelly murdered and all I seek is justice."

"Forget the past," Jahangir interrupted. "You are here and I will do all I can to make you happy. It is I who wish to marry you. You will be my wife, my favourite Empress. We have waited long years for this and we will now be happy." The Emperor leaned

further forward. But Mihrunnissa was not to be tempted. She answered proudly :

" I have not waited, Your Majesty, I was happy with my noble husband, and all I now desire is that his murderers will be brought to justice, made to answer for their cruel deed."

" This is a matter we must leave to my judges," said the Emperor unctuously. " For us, we have but to think of ourselves. You will be my bride, my wife. You shall be the first Begum in my court. I will place my Imperial crown upon your lovely head, and all Hindustan shall respect and love you as Empress."

Mihrunnissa's eyes flashed and she held herself imperiously during this speech. The Emperor's voice had scarcely ceased when she answered in clear, ringing, and scornful tones :

" I care not for the crown or throne. What is a crown, grandeur, a palace, or a throne to me ! My husband, whom I loved, is murdered. You are the Emperor. I seek, I ask, I demand justice. Give it me and be kind, and please do not waste time on empty words."

Her contempt, her open refusal angered Jahangir. " Empty words !" he shouted

in a rage. "Mine are no empty words and you shall learn that they are not. I had you brought here to be my wife, my queen. You have spurned my offer. You want no palace, no grandeur. You shall have none. A single room in the Fort shall be your prison, and the smallest pittance the State allows to disgraced persons shall be your allowance. Go. Take her hence," he commanded and threw himself backwards into the cushions of his Throne.

Mihrunnissa turned proudly away. But as she traversed the hall the Emperor's words rang in her mind and as she re-seated herself in the palki she whispered to herself : "A single room, a prisoner, the Fort, disgraced ! what does he mean ? How shall I bear it ?"

She was borne from the Darbar Hall to one of the most gloomy rooms in the Fort and here she was kept as a prisoner. Hers was a proud and haughty nature, and her spirit rebelled at such humiliation and privation, and at first she gave herself up to excessive grief. The eldest Sultana Rokia and Queen Jodh Bai at length obtained permission to visit her, and later Jodh Bai persuaded her son to allow her to have charge of Mihrunnissa and remove her from the Fort prison to a room in her suite. Here Mihrunnissa spent six years.

For the first two years she held herself bitterly disposed towards Jahangir but gradually under the influence of Queen Jodh Bai and Sultana Rokia she began to recover her spirits. Her beauty became more fascinating than ever. Her cleverness and her skill in needlework gave her an occupation and she formed a school where she taught ladies, girls, and slaves how to embroider, sew, and paint. By the sale of her needlework, she bettered her monetary condition. Her tact and engaging conversation made her a general favourite and by Queens, ladies, and all in the Imperial zenana she was called Nur Mahal, Light of the Palace. The name of Mihrunnissa fell into disuse and as Nur Mahal her praises began to be sounded in Jahangir's ears. He refused to hear a word in her favour. He had not forgotten her scorn of him in the Darbar Hall and he determined she should be ignored.

The influence of Jodh Bai had something to do with it but now the recollection of how she had scorned the Imperial position Jahangir had offered often came to her. Perhaps love itself forced her to humility. She Afghān had won her respect and affection but he had not the love of her life. That had been given to Jahangir when as Prince Salem he had surprised her at the fountain on the moonlit night so long ago.

It had lain dormant all these years and now it re-awakened. Perhaps ambition stirred it back to life. Perhaps the judicious words of Queen Jodh Bai revealed her own heart to Nur Mahal, but anyway the fancy of her girlhood returned and the memory of those secret letters of the past. She began to make delicate overtures to the Emperor. Skilfully arranged bouquets of flowers were offered him from the widow of Shere. He turned his face away from them. A wonderful fan of peacock's glowing feathers was laid for his use every morning. At first he noticed it not but after a time he examined, then admired, and then questioned from whence it came. A shade of softness crossed his face.

A festival came and with it a Fancy Bazar. These zenana *melas* had been multiplied since the days of Akbar. Now they were held very frequently, the Emperor's birthday and other celebrations were ready excuses for them. At this *mela* Nur Mahal's name was on every tongue. The creations of her active mind were the rage of the day. Every lady of the court insisted on wearing what Nur Mahal had designed. All the walls were hung with tapestries from her school, and pictures painted by her were treasured by the Queens and Begums. Jahangir, in spite of his offended majesty, became interested.

He walked through the *mela* scanning every face and holding the wonderful peacock feather fan. No Nur Mahal was there but Queen Jodh Bai noted and smiled.

A few days after the *mela* Jodh Bai invited her son to be present at a party in her apartments. When Jahangir entered his mother's room Nur Mahal stood in a group of ladies near a window. She was simply dressed in widow's white with her black hair parted severely in the centre. Her dazzling beauty could not have been better adorned, and among the richly dressed ladies of the court her simple attire made her all the more remarkable. Jahangir could not keep his eyes from wandering to the window, and his mother Jodh Bai gave him an opportunity of a closer view of the lovely widow. In a lull of the conversation she called out : " Nur Mahal, come and do your *darshan* (homage) to the *Badshah*."

Nur Mahal moved slowly forwards and with evident reluctance. When she reached the front of the couch on which the Emperor sat beside his mother, she sank gracefully to her knees, first touching the ground and then her forehead with her right hand. The homage paid, she rose to her feet and stood with eyes fixed on the floor. No words of hers could have been more eloquent. Her dazzling

beauty once more thrilled Jahangir. Jodh Bai called another forward and Nur Mahal slipped away, but the Emperor carried a fresh vision of her from the room.

His Rajput and eldest Queen Reba had awakened in him his boyish love but as the years rolled on reverence became his attitude towards her. Steeped in prayer Reba seemed like some lovely celestial flower lent to earth for a while. And Jahangir craved a companion, a nature in sympathy and affinity with his own, some one to share the burden of Empire with him. The sight of Nur Mahal in his mother's room roused all his love and longing for her and a few days after he intimated to his mother that he wished to visit Nur Mahal in her own apartments.

A time was appointed and Jodh Bai accompanied him. Nur Mahal received him at the door. He was struck with the elegance of her apartment and the beautiful dresses of her maids. He noted the severity of her own costume of simple and coarse cotton, and he asked her " why this plain attire when your maids are so handsomely dressed ?"

Nur Mahal answered gently in a voice of tender and resigned melancholy. "*Jahapuna*, those born to servitude must dress as it pleases their masters. These are my servants

and I endeavour to lighten their lot by every indulgence in my power, and design handsome dresses for them. But I am Your Majesty's slave, O Emperor of the World, and I must dress according to your pleasure." The melody of her voice, her meekness, her gentle reproach completely conquered Jahangir. Nur Mahal's hour had come.

"Nur Mahal, I love you, ask what you desire. I would make you my Queen."

Nur Mahal, raising her eyes to his, read his soul, he was now the imprisoned one and he too must be punished. For a while she stood in silence and then said softly : "I wish to go back to Burdwan."

Jahangir sadly walked out of the room, and Jodh Bai followed her son.

Two days later as Nur Mahal sat working in her room the door opened and the Sultana Reba entered. She seated herself without ceremony beside Nur Mahal and asked her to consider the question of marrying Jahangir. The beautiful Rajput enhanced the proposal by resigning in Nur Mahal's favour her place as First Begum in Jahangir's harem. The unconditional offer held the widow dumb and the Sultana left her. But when a little later Jodh Bai entered she found Nur Mahal willing to receive Jahangir.

In the interview which followed Jahangir clasped around her neck an exquisite pearl necklace, each pearl had cost £4,000, and there were forty of them, all matching each other in symmetry, shape, and lustre. The marriage was celebrated with great magnificence, and Jahangir issued a proclamation that his new bride was henceforth to be known as Nur Jahan, Light of the World, and that she was to be styled *Shahi*, Empress.

The ascendancy of Nur Jahan was complete. Jahangir could not do enough to make up for those six years of his coldness. He could do nothing without her. He wanted her advice on all matters. He wanted her presence near him everywhere. But Nur Jahan was careful in the observance of her religion and the Moslem rule for the enclosure of women is very strict. Jahangir's worship of her developed into ingenuity. He had a seat contrived for her behind his Throne in the Darbar Hall. In the wooden screen which shielded her from the public gaze there was a small aperture, through which Nur Jahan passed her hand and let it rest on the Emperor's shoulder, when he sat in council or State.

Thus his heart was stilled and filled. Never before in his life had he known such happiness. He himself wrote that he had

not understood what the word love meant until he married Nur Jahan. And she wielded her power well. Immediately after her marriage her father was raised to the office of Vizier or Prime Minister. He was a good and able man and the Empire prospered under his wise guidance. Aided by him Nur Jahan effected improvements in every way. She increased the magnificence and grandeur of the court but she also curtailed its expenses. Coin was struck in her honour by her adored husband and he declared that the gold and silver of his realm was enhanced by having the effigy of the most wonderful woman of the age stamped upon it.

The years passed on and Jahangir lived in a dream of love. But sometimes a shadow seemed to fall across Nur Jahan as if some trouble were drawing near to her. She put it from her but again and again it came.

In the later years of his life Jahangir often suffered from asthma. At last he was so ill that he decided to go to Cashmere for a change of air. While there the Sultana noticed with grief that he improved but little. When they started on their return journey to India the Emperor was so feeble that he had to be carried in a palanquin.

Again the shadow pressed on Nur Jahan's spirit and the increasing anxiety and dread. She caused her palanquin to be carried close alongside of his, and all the tedious way she strove to cheer and comfort him. Despite all her loving care and nursing Jahangir grew rapidly worse, and when they halted at the little town of Mutti Nur Jahan felt the coming sorrow press heavily upon her. The Emperor died in her arms looking into the beautiful face of his "Light of the World."

The news that the *Badshah* was no more plunged the Empire into mourning, but his death made Nur Jahan's life's blank. She had spent years of happiness and power by his side. The tender hues of the *Naorati* had given place to lines of golden splendour, but now the gleam and happiness were gone, and purple and gray were the shadows which darkened around her.

In the heavy silence of her grief Nur Jahan accompanied the body of her husband to Lahore where he was buried. Over his grave she erected a costly mausoleum. Not far from it was her house where she lived in strict retirement for the remainder of her life, spending the nineteen years of her long widowhood in good works, and dressing in the simple unadorned white of a widow.

The Persian babe who had entered India in a simple white robe and almost starving had lived to conquer the heart of the Emperor, and had become the greatest woman of her time, and thus the prophecy of the astrologer was fulfilled. But "As we come so we go" Nur Jahan died in a simple white robe, her widow's dress, and was unostentatiously buried in a plain tomb which she had had built for herself near Jahangir's mausoleum.



